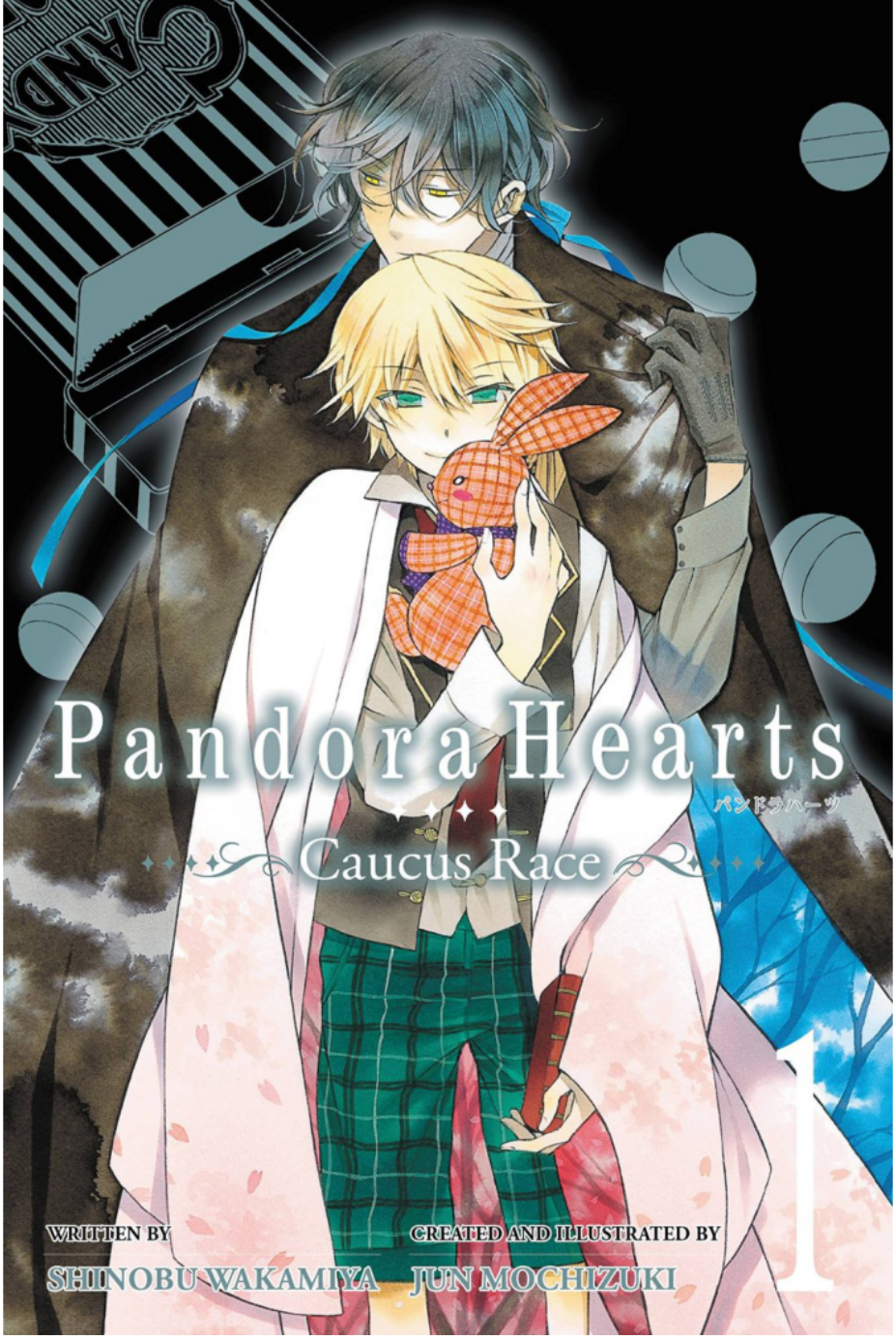
Pandora Hearts
パンドラハーツ
Caucus Race
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WRITTEN BY
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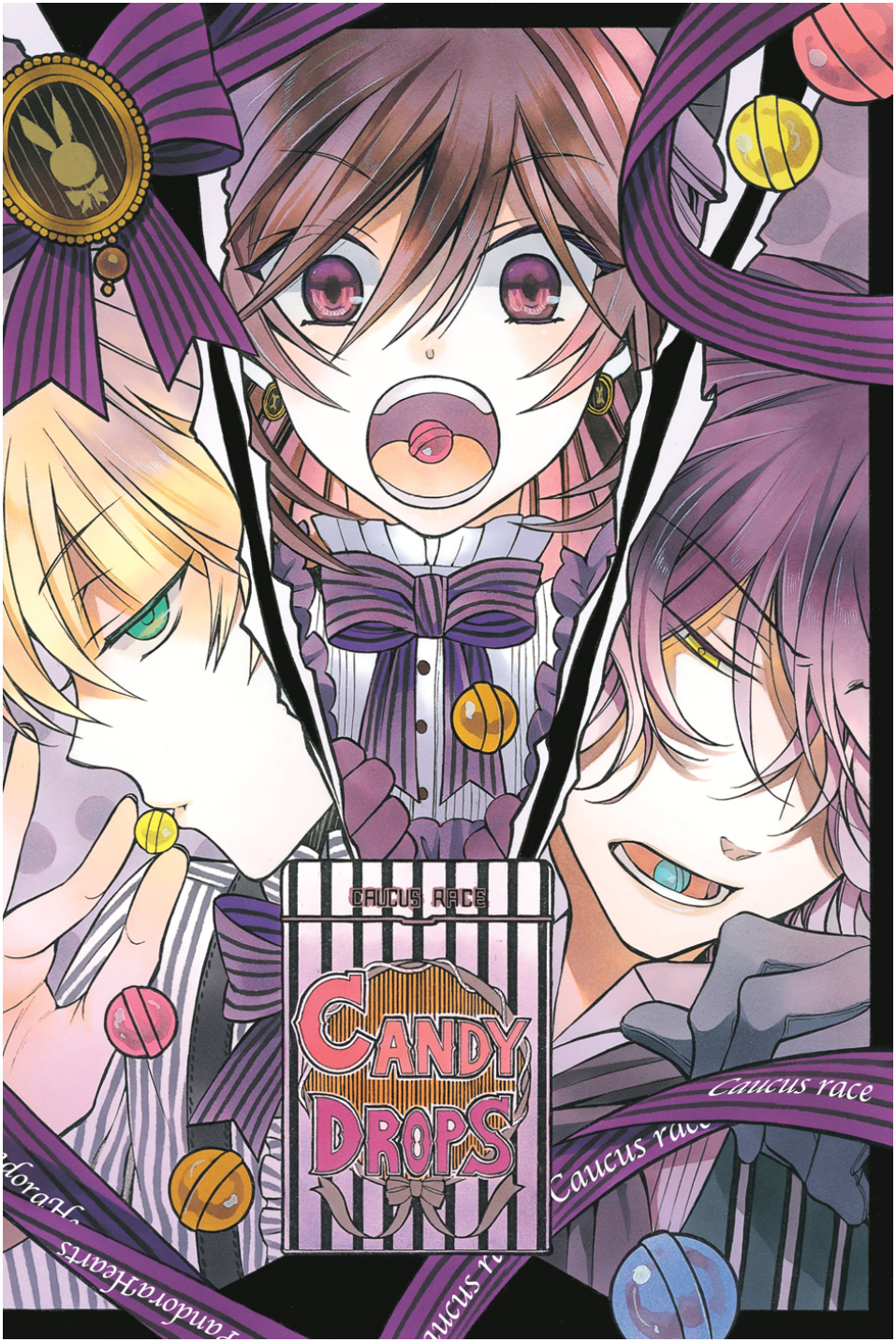
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Written by
Shinobu Wakamiya

Created and Illustrated by
Jun Mochizuki

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Inside the tin of sweets
are four jewels, like candy drops.
Look at them closely…and stories spill out.

The Story

of

THE VESSALIUSES

GOLDEN DROPS

Shining Things

Once, long ago, Oz saw falling snow that shone like gold.
His uncle Oscar had taken them far out into the country:
Oz, his little sister Ada and his valet and friend, Gilbert.
There he saw a world tinged with deepening gold, so beautiful it took his breath away…

| 11:00 |

In his nice, warm, private room at Pandora Headquarters, Oz Vessalius slept.

"…Nn."

The sun was already high.

The light that crept through the gap in the curtains fell across his cheek, and it seemed to disturb him a little: He was frowning slightly in his sleep. Even so, he showed no sign of waking.

Cocooned in a down comforter, his head sinking into a soft pillow, he slept without stirring. His breathing was slow and regular. The room was filled with a delicate, tranquil stillness of the sort that anyone would go out of their way to avoid disturbing.

Just then, a faint sound ruffled the stillness.

Creeeak…

It was the sound of the door that led to the hallway, opening.

"—"

Someone slipped smoothly into the room through the barely open door. A girl with long black hair.

The girl looked around the room. When she spotted Oz on the bed, she broke into a tiny, mischievous smile.

It was a charming smile, like a flower bud opening.

—In the next instant: "Ha-*hah!!*"

The girl bared her fangs (canines, really) in a ferocious grin, launched herself into a sprint…

And took a flying leap at the bed.

Lithe limbs flailing gracefully, she reached the zenith of her jump, nearly touching the ceiling.

She was directly over the bed. Just below her, locked in her sights, was Oz, still sleeping peacefully, although his expression seemed a bit uneasy.

She couldn't possibly miss.

Oz was fast asleep.

The girl's eyes shone with a predatory gleam. At the perfect moment, when there was no possible chance of anything in the universe sending her off-course…

…her dainty lips opened…

…and she spoke, gleefully, almost singing:

"Ooooz! 🎵"

It was a full-force, gravity-driven attack.

At the very last second, a premonition of incoming menace woke Oz,

and—maybe it was coincidence, or a miracle—he managed to avoid the attack by half-falling out of bed.

With an impressive *fwump*, the girl landed on the down comforter on her derriere and immediately said, "Tch!" She sounded disappointed, but still somehow entertained. Then she bounced right back up to her feet and stood on the bed, drawn up to her full height, feet apart, looking down at Oz.

Although Oz had managed to avoid the attack itself, he'd hit the back of his head when he tumbled to the floor, and he was groaning in a scratchy voice. He sat up, running a hand through his sleep-tousled blond hair, his face still drowsy. He rubbed the back of his head where he'd hit it on the floor, looking up at the girl in a daze. Then he spoke.

"Good morning, Alice. Listen…"

"Huhn! It's noon already. You mean 'good evening'! Good! Eve! En! Ning!"

Alice, the ultra-aggressive girl, smiled defiantly, puffing out her chest proudly for no apparent reason.

"Umm," Oz said, hedging. "Good evening, Alice. Listen…"

"You evaded that attack quite well! I'm impressed! That deserves praise: Good boy, well done!"

"…Could you explain why you're making attempts on my life all of a sudden?"

"You slept in. I came to wake you up," Alice told him, as if to say *Worship me*. "Be grateful, Oz! Bwa-ha-ha!"

Alice looked to be in her mid-teens, but that arrogant attitude suited her to a T. …Not that that made it okay. Still, she didn't lie. If she said she'd come to wake him up, then it was true.

…In Alice's mind, anyway.

"I see," murmured Oz. Alice didn't look as if she felt a shred of guilt. "Then, er, couldn't you have been nice and shaken me gently or something?"

"What are you talking about?! I *was* nice! There aren't many as nice as I am. Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"…You're feeling good, aren't you, Alice?"

Oz was laughing a little. "Mm-hmm," Alice said, with an exaggerated nod.

Alice was always high-energy, but this morning she was even more hyper than usual.

Oz wondered whether something good had happened. Even if it had, if it made her attack him in his sleep, he wasn't at all confident that he could simply feel happy for her.

At Oz's words, Alice's expression flared even brighter:

"Exactly, Oz! Good job noticing that. I'm feeling fantastic today!"

"Yes, I can tell by looking at you."

"Heh. I know what this is. It's called 'powering up,' am I right? Hm?"

Powering up? Oz was puzzled. Alice kept right on talking a blue streak.

"Ha-haaa! I've felt hot and strange since this morning, you see. It's as though some completely new me is about to wake up! I've never felt anything like this before. I bet I'm about to acquire some tremendous new power. Not only that, but when I walk, my feet feel a bit unsteady, as if I'm floating. Kuh-kuh-kuh… I may be able to fly soon! True, my head feels sort of foggy and it hurts like the dickens, but—heh-heh—I'm sure it's all because I'm powering u— *Achoo! Cough, cough!* Bwa-ha, bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! *Snurff, wachoo!*"

Alice bragged, seeming to be at the top of her game. However, she sneezed and coughed, and her delicate, finely shaped nose was running.

—*Wait just a minute*, Oz thought, staring aghast.

Abruptly, he put his face very close to Alice's. Telling her not to move, he leaned his forehead against hers.

At first, startled, Alice tried to pull away.

"Wh-what, Oz?!"

"No you don't. Hold still." Oz caught Alice's shoulders. "…"

"…Oz?"

"You're running a fever!"

Alice's forehead was astonishingly hot. Oz's face grew earnest and very serious.

"That isn't 'powering up,'" he told her. "That's a cold!"

…*A cold?* Alice cocked her head to the side, perplexed.

It wasn't quite noon yet.

| 12:00 |

I've never heard of a Chain catching cold before, Gilbert Nightray thought.

It was noon, and the day was sunny and peaceful.

Gilbert was sitting on a chair pulled close to the bed in Oz's room. His eyes, which tended to get hidden by his black hair, were troubled and downcast, and his eyebrows were drawn together in what appeared to be sorrow. The combination made him look truly worried.

"…"

He was gazing at the bed.

It was Oz's bed, in Oz's room, but now Alice had taken his place. She was wrapped up in the down comforter with a damp towel on her forehead, clearly and unmistakably sick. She'd been bundled into bed over her objections, and she looked dissatisfied, displeased, and irritated, but she was also feverish, and she seemed a bit weak.

"…Haah… I can't believe it," Gilbert muttered, shaking his head.

He gave a despondent sigh.

Quietly, almost to himself, he murmured:

"Who'd have thought the stupid rabbit would actually catch cold? Fools *never* catch cold."

"*What* was that—?!"

Alice shot bolt upright in bed, sending the towel flying.

Gilbert wasn't melancholy, or worried, or sad. He was simply appalled at Alice's cold.

Setting aside the question of whether the rabbit's stupid or not, how could a Chain catch a human disease…?

Alice, who was wearing a set of boy's pajamas that Oz had insisted she take, stood up on the bed indignantly.

"Why you…! Are you muck…mocking me?!"

She'd meant to sound sharp, but she tripped over her own tongue, slurring the words.

She growled in frustration. Gilbert sighed. *Good grief.*

"Never mind. You're sick. Get back in bed and stay there."

"Don't you make fun of me! *Who's* sick?! This is nothing! Just give me some meat and I'll be fine in no time—! …Oog…"

Alice started off aggressively, but before long, her body listed unsteadily. Despite her words, she seemed limp and exhausted.

"…What did I tell you? Lie down."

Weakly, Alice collapsed back onto the bed with a thump. Gilbert heaved another sigh.

Frustrated that her body wouldn't do what she told it to, Alice muttered an aggravated "Tch!"

Still appalled, Gilbert fixed the wildly rumpled comforter and retrieved the towel from where it had fallen by the pillow.

When he picked it up, he noticed that the wet towel was lukewarm, so he dipped it into a brass basin of ice water that was sitting on the floor and wrung it out again. Most of this was done with almost no thought on Gilbert's part. By now, taking care of people was second nature to him.

He thought back.

A little while ago, when he'd come to this room, he'd run into Oz, who was on his way out.

Oz had told him about Alice's cold, and then declared enthusiastically:

"I'm taking care of Alice all by myself. I'll do *everything.*"

Then he'd added, firmly:

"And Gil, you're in charge of making sure Alice takes it easy!"

Then he'd left the room, saying that he was going to get food and medicine for Alice.

He was probably planning to pick up a prescription at the dispensary, but Gilbert had his doubts as to whether human medicine would work on a Chain.

Oz hadn't looked like someone who'd shouldered responsibility for an onerous job. He'd seemed determined not to let anyone steal his fun. He'd been bursting with enthusiasm. Alice was special to Oz; Gilbert knew that. That probably explained it, but…

As he thought, Gilbert laid the cold, damp towel on Alice's forehead.

"Nnrgh…" Alice wasn't happy about being treated like a sick person, but she didn't struggle.

An expression of comfort crept across her fever-bright face, and she gave a small cough.

No matter how you looked at her, she was a clear, picture-perfect example of a girl who'd caught a cold.

Well, Gilbert thought to himself, *I guess when the stupid rabbit's this meek, she's not entirely uncute—*

Chomp.

Gilbert's hand had been hovering over Alice's face, and she bit his little finger with enough force to make an audible noise.

It was so unexpected that Gilbert felt shock before he felt any pain. He didn't understand what had just happened.

Belatedly, as the pain registered, he screamed internally: *Did she just* bite *me—?!*

Why?!

It made absolutely no sense.

His head was filled with a blizzard of question marks.

Alice glared at Gilbert. Then, still latched onto his little finger like a fish on a hook, she smiled triumphantly.

"Mugaw, mugaw mugaw! (You jerk! You were laughing at me, weren't you?!)"

She seemed to have sensed it in the air. Animal instincts were not to be trifled with.

"Wha?! Hey, you—! Let go! Let *go*, I said!"

Thoroughly flustered, Gilbert swung his hand around, trying to shake her off. Alice wouldn't let go.

It wouldn't be at all okay to break a sick girl's grip by knocking her flying, but…

It hurt so much that Gilbert thought, *I can't be picky about how I do it!* Reluctantly, he clenched his free hand into a fist.

Just then, the latch rattled, the door swung open, and a perplexed voice said, "…??? What are you two doing?"

Gilbert and Alice looked at the door. Instantly, Alice (finally) released Gilbert's finger.

Oz was standing there with a silver tray balanced on one hand, and he was wearing an apron.

—An apron with little chicks all over it.

Oatmeal with mashed bananas mixed in.

That was what Oz had prepared for Alice. Oatmeal was oats—a type of large grain—that had been roughly ground or finely cut to make them easier to cook, and it was usually simmered with water or milk. It was boiled until soft to make it easy to digest, was rich in vitamins, minerals, and fiber, and often turned up at breakfast.

That said, it was considered surprisingly hard to season properly.

"…Chicks," Gilbert murmured.

He was staring at Oz, and at Oz's apron. For a moment, Oz blinked in confusion—"???"—but then he got it. Dexterously balancing the tray, he twirled once, flaring the apron proudly.

"I wear it pretty well, don't I? They told me I really looked the part. I bet I'll make a good wife someday!"

Oz looked tickled pink. He was really into this.

"—Yes, it looks very good on you," Gilbert told him, straight-faced.

He sounded as if he meant it.

"Gil… Don't give me a serious answer. There's a punch line here, but that isn't it."

Oz sounded disgusted, and Gilbert hemmed: "Oh, uh. Hm."

Still, it was true: Oz really did look good in that apron. Gilbert turned slightly away from Oz, averting his gaze, and cleared his throat. Then, abruptly, the blood drained from his face.

"The apron… Does that mean… Oz, d-don't tell me… Did *you* make this…?"

He'd eaten Oz's cooking once. The memory rose in his mind. Even if he was being polite, "ghastly" had been the only word to describe it. However, Oz was brimming with confidence.

"It's fine! I had the cook show me what to do as I was making it. I even tasted it to make sure. They told me I had a knack for this!"

It wasn't likely that the future head of the House of Vessalius would ever need a knack for cooking, but Oz looked thoroughly pleased by the idea.

At the sound of loud sniffing, Gilbert glanced at the bed.

Alice was kneeling on the bed with her legs splayed out to either side in an M. Her face was tipped slightly upward, and she was sniffing the air.

"Hmm." She nodded in approval. "Something smells good, Oz."

"I know, right?! I made you something tasty, Alice."

"Oho. Then—of course—it has meat in it, doesn't it?"

"Huh? No, it doesn't."

"…I didn't quite catch that." Alice repeated herself: "*Of course* it has meat in it, doesn't it?"

"I told you, there's no meat."

"*Whaaat…?!*"

That can't be! Alice reared back, seemingly shocked to the core.

"I put in milk and cinnamon and banana and—"

Oz's explanation didn't seem to get through to Alice. She drooped dejectedly, planting both hands on the bed.

"I *trusted* you. I can't believe you'd betray me like this…"

From her pose, Gilbert thought she might be about to snap, and he hastily dropped into a fighting stance.

However, Alice stayed deeply depressed, wrapped in an aura of gloom. The sight left him feeling a bit deflated, and he thought, *The cold must have knocked the fight out of her.*

"It's all right, it tastes really good," Oz said cheerfully, and took over Gilbert's chair.

Setting the tray on his knees, he picked up a silver spoon from where it lay beside the deep dish of oatmeal. Since it had come straight from the kitchen, steam rose from the dish, and it looked piping hot.

Oz scooped up a spoonful, brought it to his own lips, and blew on it to cool it.

Then:

"Here, Alice. Say 'aaaah.'"

…Wha… 'Say aaaah'?!

Gilbert, who'd gone to stand behind Oz and a bit to the side after vacating the chair, stared, flabbergasted.

Deferentially, Oz held the spoon out to Alice, holding a napkin under her chin with his other hand to catch any spills. He was the very picture of devoted service.

Y-you'd really go that far, Oz—?!

The sight of his master being a servant poleaxed Gilbert.

Apparently Alice found this sort of meticulous encouragement flattering. With a small grunt, she drew close to the spoon. Since Oz had blown on it, it had cooled down a little, but it was still fresh oatmeal, and it was still quite hot. She couldn't just gulp down the whole spoonful at once. She pecked at the spoon with her lips, panting a little to let the steam escape her mouth.

Oz watched her, and his eyes looked happy. He seemed to be thinking, *Alice sure is cute.*

Gilbert watched Oz. His shoulders were trembling slightly.

"There's still a lot more. Here…"

Once again, Oz dipped the spoon into the oatmeal and held it out to Alice. At that, Gilbert couldn't take it anymore and interrupted. "Wait!"

As a valet, the sight of his master waiting on someone was too much for him. At his sudden, sharp cry, both Oz and Alice looked startled.

"Oz, you don't have to do that!" Gilbert said. His expression was one of desperation.

"Gil? …But Alice is—" *Sick*, Oz was about to say, but before he could

finish—

"Then *I'll* do it!" Gilbert insisted, catching the wrist of the hand that held the spoon. Oz looked blank.

"Huh? …Gil, you're going to make her say 'aaaah'? I…I'd actually like to see that, but…"

"I'm not saying 'aaaah'!"

Gilbert refused point-blank. At that, Oz used his free hand to pry Gilbert's fingers from his wrist, whisking his hand away so that Gilbert couldn't take the spoon. Oz gave him a mild glare.

"…But no. I told you, I'm going to take care of Alice. Remember?"

No matter how Gilbert argued, Oz seemed determined to hang on to his role as Alice's caretaker.

If he pressed him too hard, he really might put Oz out of sorts. Gilbert couldn't do anything but watch, although he was choking back the urge to cut and run the whole time. The worried wrinkle between his eyebrows grew deeper and deeper.

Oz fed Alice oatmeal as if he were feeding a small bird.

"Is it good, Alice?"

"Mmm. It's not bad. It would be perfect if it had meat, though."

"When you're better. —Oh."

Oz, who'd been plying the spoon cheerfully, seemed to remember something. He turned back to Gilbert.

"By the way, Gil."

"…What."

"You came to my room. Did you need something?"

"Oh—"

At those words, Gilbert remembered.

| 13:00 |

"—And so, the number of illegal contractors of which Pandora is aware is…"

In an office in a corner of Pandora Headquarters, Sharon Rainsworth's voice rose and fell.

It was one in the afternoon, and the sun had just begun its journey down the sky.

Oz wasn't present. The office held only Sharon, Xerxes Break, and Gilbert.

Gilbert stood, leaning against the wall, listening to Sharon without paying much attention to her. He'd visited Oz's room to pass on a request from Sharon, who'd wanted to meet as a group and discuss a few things after lunch. The content of the discussion itself was of little importance: just a report on Pandora's overall activity. Oz and Gilbert tended to work independently instead of as part of the organization, and Sharon had thought it would be good for them to know a little about the rest.

Oz had refused on the grounds that he had business he couldn't leave unattended. Gilbert hadn't been very interested, either: He was here because he'd thought it would look bad for both him and Oz to be absent.

—*Please tell Sharon-chan I'm sorry*, Oz had said.

…Alice was really special to Oz. Gilbert knew that. What he didn't know was how special, or why Oz felt she was special.

Because she'd returned him to this world from the Abyss, which was said to be impossible to escape? But it would be more accurate to say that Alice had used Oz in order to cross to this side herself. On top of that, in making Oz an illegal contractor, she'd practically wired him with a time bomb.

If anything, it wouldn't have been at all odd for him to resent Alice—

As he reached that particular thought, Gilbert suddenly found himself perplexed.

What do I *think of that stupid rabbit?*

Her stupidity was constantly causing him trouble, her confrontational personality made him very uncomfortable, and that arrogant attitude of hers frequently got on his nerves. Not only that, but she was a meat-loving picky eater who was always hungry, and, well, as a cook, it was nice to see someone eat what he'd made as if it tasted *that* good. —But that was neither here nor there.

It seemed to him as if he had every reason to hate her and none whatsoever to like her.

Was that why? Gilbert remembered Oz in that apron. Oz wasn't used to cooking, but he'd done it for Alice. Was that why he'd felt so restless —you could almost have called it irritated—at seeing Oz wait on her?

Hah—! Wait, am I jealous? …Me? …Of the stupid rabbit?

Not even possible, he thought. He shook his head with a dry little smile.

To clear his mind, he thought about the chick pattern on the apron Oz had been wearing.

You know, that apron really did look good on him. He's an aristocrat, and yet he's able to wear commoner clothes with style. That's my master for you —

Lost in thought as he was, Gilbert failed to notice it.

For a while now, having registered that he wasn't paying attention to her, Sharon had been calling his name.

"Hellooooo? Gilbert-kun?"

When Break came up beside him and spoke—loudly—right in his ear, Gilbert came to himself with a jolt.

He looked over. Break was pointing at something.

When Gilbert glanced in that direction…

"Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee." *Thoom-thoom-thoom-thoom…*

There was Sharon, wearing a flawlessly elegant smile. The pressure she gave off as she beamed made Gilbert quail instantly.

"You seem to have wandered into an entertaining daydream, 'Raven.'"

A shudder chilled his spine. It was all Gilbert could do to squeeze out a "…Nuh, no." Sharon's bright smile seemed to corner him—"I've been speaking of matters of some importance, you know. What were you thinking about?"—and his answer came as a gasp.

"Ch-chicks," he said, honestly.

"—Chicks?" Sharon and Break cocked their heads in simultaneous confusion.

"Alice-kun has a cold, eh?"

"And Oz-sama is nursing her…which is why he was unable to attend."

After Gilbert filled them in, Break and Sharon wore odd expressions, as if everything made sense and, at the same time, made no sense at all.

Apparently neither of them had ever heard of a Chain catching cold before, either. From their reactions, Gilbert thought, asking if they knew how to handle the situation wasn't likely to yield any noteworthy responses.

Break, who was standing beside Sharon, raised a jaunty index finger.

"Meaning that, with his master taken from him, faithful hound Gil-kun is feeling *lonely*."

"My!"

Sharon put a hand to her mouth and giggled.

"That's not it! I'm not particularly…"

Gilbert argued, blushing, but his words and expression only fueled Break's and Sharon's smiles.

Gilbert could never match these two in this sort of exchange, and the least damaging strategy in this situation would have been to beat a hasty retreat. Of course, if Gilbert had been able to read the room and make a decision like that one, he wouldn't have been Gilbert.

"…I just… Oz insisted on taking care of the stupid rabbit himself, and I thought it was weird… Not only did he cook for her, he did the 'Say aaaah' thing—"

Break and Sharon: "(Grin, grin)"

—*I shouldn't have said that!* Gil realized, but it was much, much too late.

"O-*ho*. 'Aaaah,' you say?" said Break.

"'Aaaah,' wasn't it?" said Sharon.

"'Aaaah'—" Break and Sharon chorused.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you two driving at?!"

Gilbert lashed out in self-defense. Sharon gave a smile as bright and beautiful as sunshine.

"No, no. Nothing at all—*snrk*! Tee-hee."

"Heh-heh, you mustn't laugh, my lady… Heh-heh-heh!"

"Wh-wh-why you—!"

"—That's enough for now. We've got his attention," Break said, without blinking.

"Yes." Sharon nodded, her face serious.

"This may be cause for concern. A disease that affects Chains… Perhaps it's a curse of some sort."

They completely ignored my reaction, Gilbert thought morosely.

Come to think of it, both Sharon and Break were contracted to Chains. If there was a possibility that this disease or phenomenon could affect their own Chains, then it certainly was their business.

Gilbert himself was in the very same position, but he hadn't thought things through that far.

These two were perfectly synchronized with each other, and he wasn't able to follow the pace of their conversation. He was at their mercy from beginning to end.

"Hmm." Break gave a small sigh. "What does Oz-kun say?"

"…He's enthusiastic."

"Beg pardon?"

"He's enthusiastically taking care of the stupid rabbit. He actually looks happy—"

As he mentioned that to Break, Gilbert's eyes suddenly fell to his own hand.

Oz's hand, as he'd dipped the spoon into the oatmeal and held it out to Alice. This was the hand he'd used to grab his wrist.

The fingers he'd wrapped around Oz's wrist had been pried off right away.

…Something was bothering him. He wasn't sure what it was, but it was there.

No, I do know. That was—

He opened and closed that hand, several times.

He'd fallen abruptly silent. Break watched him, quietly, not interrupting.

Sharon looked as if she'd like to ask what was wrong.

"Oh…" Gilbert muttered.

A scene flared in the back of his mind, just for a moment. Something distant, and faint, and nostalgic.

Fluttering, sparkling, swirling as it fell—

Gilbert looked up. He spoke, shortly.

"Golden…snow…"

Break and Sharon had no idea what he meant by that, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Gilbert had turned on his heel and was

walking away, heading out of the office at a rapid clip.

From behind him, Sharon called to him, but he didn't have the time to answer. He reached the hall and headed for Oz's room, almost running. He knew the distance wasn't that great, but it *felt* far away, and it made him anxious and irritable.

—*That idiot!* He muttered under his breath.

Arriving at Oz's door, Gilbert flung it open without knocking, calling "Oz!" as he did so.

"Ugh, gkh, aaaaaaaaah……!!" Alice cried out in agony.

| 13:30 |

On the bed, Alice was clawing at her chest and gasping in pain.

"Alice! …Alice, are you okay?!" Oz was leaning forward, calling her name over and over.

"—?! Oz, what's the matter?!"

Gilbert rushed over to them. Oz looked up at Gilbert, shaking his head. "I don't know, she just suddenly…"

This was much more than a mere cold.

Alice's body was arched like a bow. She'd gone into convulsions. She flung the down comforter off, and when Oz reached out to her, worried, she scratched his arm. "Ow!" Oz cried.

Neither Oz nor Gilbert knew what was happening to Alice. Her arms clawed the air as if she were a drowning swimmer who was desperately trying to surface. Her eyes were unfocused, as if she was delirious from a high fever.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah…!!"

Her scream split the air in the room. "Alice!" yelled Oz.

Then, abruptly, she fell silent, collapsing limply. *What now?* Gilbert thought, warily.

"Aah—"

Alice grimaced, making a small noise, and then—

"WACHOOO

steak." "Grilled meat?!" Grilled meat, hee-hee, pretty amazing, huh?" "What are *you* bragging about?" "Then there's meat in the kitchen?" "There is." "There is, there is." "What if there isn't?" "If there isn't, there isn't." "How philosophical." "Philosophical?" "Philosophical meat?" "What does that taste like?" "Flavor that makes you think." "Is it yummy?" "…It makes you think."

"…Huh? What's going on?" Oz muttered, dazed.

It was a scene straight out of a joke, or possibly a nightmare. With that explosive sneeze, about a hundred—no, more—tiny Alices had materialized from Alice's body. They were only about fifteen centimeters tall, and they'd spread all over the room, wriggling and squirming.

Closer inspection showed that each one was rather cute, like a doll. Still, the sight of more than a hundred of them swarming and chattering was terribly creepy. Not only were they all over the floor, but some were stuck to the ceiling or crawling over the walls, and they were all yelling, "Meat! Meat! Meat!"

"Oz, what is this?!" Gilbert shouted.

"How should *I* know?! D-does this happen with colds?"

"Not that I ever heard…"

The situation was so weird that Gilbert felt more irritated than shocked or aghast, and he clicked his tongue. It wasn't a loud sound, but the mini-Alices had sharp ears. Moving in unison, they all turned to look at Gilbert.

The silent, fixed stare of a hundred tiny creatures was a little—no, *very*—eerie.

Gilbert felt a chill run down his spine. The mini-Alices were whispering among themselves.

"What should we do?" "Should we eat him?" "For starters, sure." "But depending on how we cook him…"

"That's a pretty dangerous topic, midgets!" Gilbert yelled, although he was backing away quickly. Even as he did so…

"Meat!" "Meat!" "Meat!" "Meat!" "Meat!" "Meat!" "Meat!" "Meat-meat-meat-meat-meat-meat-meat-meat-meat-meat—!"

With their eyes glittering viciously in their adorable faces, the hundred-plus mini-Alices rushed at Gilbert like a tsunami.

There was no way for him to fight. —Gilbert prepared to die.

"…?!"

"Gil!" Oz was calling him, desperately.

Gilbert's consciousness slid helplessly into darkness—

The swarm of mini-Alices had mobbed Gilbert, kicked him mercilessly, and disappeared into the hall.

The only ones left in the room were a dazed Oz; Gilbert, on the ground and unconscious; and Alice, breathing hard on the bed, as if she was in pain. Worried, Oz looked from Gilbert to Alice and back. He ran to Gilbert first and discovered that he'd only passed out, and that nothing was really wrong.

With a short sigh of relief, Oz immediately turned and ran to Alice.

“Alice!”

“Those little…”

Alice tried to stand, but it was as if she had no strength left, and she sat down flat on her behind.

“I told you, don’t push yourself.”

Oz soothed Alice, making her lie down.

Alice tried to bluster that she *wasn’t* pushing herself, but there was absolutely no force in the glare she sent at Oz.

“Those were… Those midgets are my ‘strength,’” Alice muttered, letting her head fall to the pillow.

“Your strength?” echoed Oz.

“I felt like something inside my body was restless earlier, and…it overflowed, just now.”

Apparently that sneeze had been the trigger.

That said, Oz couldn’t immediately accept the idea. It was just too strange.

Stunned, he gazed at the door the mini-Alices had disappeared through.

He couldn’t even imagine the sort of ruckus that had to be enveloping Pandora Headquarters right now.

“…Arrrgh, I can’t.”

Alice tried to sit up, but her body wouldn’t listen to her. She muttered in frustration.

“Alice, you’ve got to lie still.”

As Oz chided her, concerned, Alice gazed up at him with unfocused eyes. Her small lips moved: “Please.” Oz saw, and he nodded. As Alice’s consciousness faded, she murmured, “Please get back my strength.”

“All right,” Oz said, without hesitation. “Tell me what to do.”

“…I don’t care how you do it. Stomp on them or wring them to death, or do anything you want, but kill them. If you do, they should turn back into ordinary strength and come back to me.”

Alice spoke as though she was delirious. Then her eyes slid shut. Oz called, “Alice!” in spite of himself, but Alice’s only response was her labored breathing. She seemed to have completely lost consciousness.

This was a far cry from the Alice who was sometimes violently energetic and cheerful. Oz knit his brows as though he was in pain.

“—Alice’s strength.”

Nothing about the situation seemed real, but he knew exactly what he had to do.

He had to save Alice.

Oz opened a hand in front of his face, then balled it into a fist. With an expression that made it look as if he was praying, he pushed the fist against his forehead. “…Okay,” he muttered, and although his voice was quiet, his tone was determined.

Finally, he stretched out the hand to Alice’s forehead, fixing her

tousled bangs. Then he turned on his heel.

"Just hang on, Alice."

He left the bedside, heading for the door. As he passed the fallen, unconscious Gilbert, he said, "Sorry, Gil. Once I get back, I'll take care of you properly."

He put a hand on the doorknob. Opened the door. Ran out into the hall. The hall was littered with fallen Pandora employees; like Gilbert, they'd probably been attacked by the swarm of mini-Alices. It looked like a scene of carnage. At the sight of the tragedy in the hall, Oz caught his breath.

Fortunately, although they were unconscious, none of them seemed to be injured. Silently apologizing to the fallen employees, Oz ran down the hall.

He knew where he was going.

If the mini-Alices were made of the same stuff as Alice, there was only one place they'd go.

Oz ran, thinking that it might already be too late.

He was headed for—

"The kitchen!"

The faces of the kitchen staff, the people who'd complemented him on his apron and showed him the basics of cooking, flickered through his mind.

Let me be in time, Oz prayed, and ran faster.

| 14:00 |

By the time Oz reached the kitchen, the mini-Alices had already occupied it.

Almost all the mini-Alices had gathered there and were working the kitchen staff like slaves, forcing them to prepare meat dishes. Anyone who showed even a glimmer of defiance was bitten mercilessly. They may have been cute, but at heart, they most certainly were the B-Rabbit.

The kitchen was filled with countless greedy voices calling, "Meat! Meat! Meat! Meat!"

With a pot lid for a shield and a ladle for a sword, Oz confronted the terrifying, carnivorous horde, and—

The battle in the kitchen was the stuff of legend.

| 16:30 |

"…There she is. That's the last one," Oz muttered quietly.

Behind Pandora, near the edge of the property, up in the bushy green leaves near the top of a maple tree. Oz's voice had been very soft, but in response, he had a sense of someone flinching and a cute little "Eek!" drifted down from the treetop. Through the gaps in the leaves, he could

see a tiny, doll-like shape.

It was a mini-Alice.

With the help of the kitchen staff, Oz had managed to vanquish the horde of mini-Alices who'd been terrorizing the kitchen. However, just when he thought he'd defeated them all, he'd spotted a tiny shadow sneaking out of the kitchen.

He'd chased it all the way here.

Above his head, a trembling voice spoke. "Don't erase me, don't erase me, don't erase me…"

The personality of this last Alice was apparently nothing like that of the real Alice or the other mini-Alices. She seemed to be quite a scaredy-cat.

"Don't erase me, don't make it hurt, don't pick on me, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Brr-brr-brr-brr. Her tiny body trembled in the shadows of the leaves.

Oz still held the ladle in one hand. In the kitchen, he'd used it to smack lots of mini-Alices, turning them back into strength, but…

"…"

Oz glanced at the ladle. Then he dropped it, letting it fall by his foot.

I really don't think I can smack that one, he thought.

"Okay." He nodded. "Let's go." Then he got a grip on the maple tree and began to climb.

"…Wow…"

He'd shinnied up the trunk and reached the top of the tree. As Oz clung to a large branch, his eyes found the last mini-Alice, and he gave a small cry.

Brr-brr-brr-brr.

The mini-Alice was crouched down, trembling, trying desperately to hide behind a maple leaf. Registering Oz's approach, she gave a small "Yeep!" like a songbird's cry, and looked at him with tear-filled eyes.

"Don't pick on me, don't pick on me," the mini-Alice whispered, over and over.

Sh-she's so cute… What should I do? Oz thought.

"Um, umm, listen, miss…"

"Eek!" The mini-Alice shuddered violently.

"It's okay, don't be scared."

"Don't pick on me, don't make it hurt!" *Brr-brr.*

"I won't pick on you, and I won't hurt you," Oz said, trying to calm the frightened girl.

At that, the mini-Alice poked her face out from the shadow of the maple leaf and looked at Oz. *Really?* she was thinking uneasily. *Really?* He could tell as plain as day. Oz smiled at her. "I promise," he said.

The very idea of erasing the little thing seemed cruel.

…That said, the mini-Alice was a fragment of Alice's strength. He

couldn't just leave her like this. *For now*, Oz thought, *I'll get us both back down to the ground.* He wouldn't find the answer by sitting up here worrying.

"Come here, Alice. Let's get down."

"Down?"

"Uh-huh. It isn't safe up here. I won't do anything rough, I mean it. Okay? C'mon."

"…Promise?"

"I promise. I never break my promises, either. Trust me."

"…Okay."

Answering in a tiny, tiny voice, the last mini-Alice began to walk from the end of the maple branch back toward Oz. She still seemed a bit uneasy, as if she didn't completely believe him.

"Slowly. Go slowly," Oz cautioned, and he gently reached out a hand toward the approaching mini-Alice. At first, she shrank back fearfully from Oz's outstretched hand, but he waited patiently, and at last she put out her own hands and caught his index finger.

Oz smiled. Mirroring him, the mini-Alice smiled bashfully, too. Her adorable expression made Oz sigh. In the next instant:

Oh. Gil?

* * *

It's like a golden sea, he thought.

A wide, vast field of wheat seemed to spread all the way over the horizon. When he drew a deep breath, it smelled like the sun. The ears of grain, swaying in the wind, really did look like the surface of the ocean.

The field was tended by one of the farming families the Vessalius dukedom retained. The year Oz turned twelve, Uncle Oscar took Oz, his little sister Ada, and Gilbert to visit during the harvest season. It was a short day trip, and it had been Uncle Oscar's idea.

Uncle Oscar had business to discuss with the farmers, so he told the children to go play for a while.

Immediately after saying good-bye to his uncle, Oz dove into the ocean of wheat with Ada and Gilbert.

There wasn't a cloud in the clear blue sky.

The early afternoon sunlight had just begun to deepen.

"This is a marvelous wheat field, young master."

Gilbert was carrying a basket packed with the sandwiches and dessert they'd have for lunch.

Oz puffed out his chest as though the wheat field were all his doing.

"I know, right?! That's because it's our *farmers' field, and they're amazing."*

The three of them stood side by side, gazing at the sea of gold in fascination.

Abruptly, Oz cracked a mischievous smile.

"Hey, Gil."

"Yes?"

"There's a bug on you."

"There is? Where?"

"Right there. See? Here in front, on your hair. I'll get it for you, just hold still."

He put out his index finger, bringing his hand close to Gilbert's face.

As the finger approached the long bangs that hung over his eyes, Gilbert looked uneasy; he squeezed his eyes shut. On seeing this, Oz's mischievous smile widened.

He shot a glance at Ada. Ada tilted her head, curiously, as if to ask what was going on.

"I-is it gone yet, young master? Please hurry…"

"No, wait, wait. Hrrrrn, it's bigger than I thought it was."

"What?!"

"Don't move. One…two…three—"

○×△□?!

Oz's fingers changed course and pinched Gilbert's well-shaped nose.

Gilbert's shocked expression and boggled eyes struck Oz as funny, and he laughed out loud. He let go right away. He waved a hand at Gilbert, who was looking at him a bit reproachfully, caught Ada's hand and ran, making his escape. Gilbert ran after them, calling *"Please wait!"* in a distressed voice.

Oz ran. He ran as if he was making for the wheat field's golden horizon.

Ada had looked startled at first, but she soon tightened her grip on his hand and smiled up at him.

She was giggling as she ran. Oz felt satisfaction well up inside him.

"Having fun?"

"Uh-huh! Lots of fun, Onii-chan!"

"You are, huh? Me, too!"

They panted as they spoke.

He was glad they'd come. He was deeply grateful to Uncle Oscar for having suggested the trip to his father.

As he ran, grinning ecstatically, Oz looked back.

"Too slow, Gil! We're going to leave you behind!"

"…P-please wait! Young master! Lady Adaaa!"

Oz stopped. He and Ada stood there, looking at each other, catching their breath. Finally, Gilbert caught up with them, panting and gasping. As he did so, Oz was about to take off running again when he hesitated. Just then, a great gust of wind blew through. The huge, strong wind bent the wheat low as it passed, and he heard the stalks rustling against each other. *Fwiiiiiiiiish…*

…!

Oz stood transfixed. The force of the wind made him close his eyes involuntarily.

Then, slowly, he opened them.

Tossed up into the air by the wind, the chaff sparkled in the sunlight.

Sparkling and fluttering.

Sparkling and fluttering.

It fell from a clear blue sky. Almost like…

"It's golden snow…" Oz murmured.

He caught his breath. The sight kept his eyes—no, his whole heart—riveted.

Gilbert and Ada stared, too. They stood there, wordlessly.

Once, long ago, Oz saw snow that shone like gold.

Distant, faint, nostalgic—

…Hmm? Huh…?

When he came to, groggily, Oz was rocking gently. The evening sky was flushed with vermillion.

Oz's mind was drifting, still half in that sea of gold.

—It smells like sunlight, he thought.

His mind was gradually returning to the present. He started to register the scenery around him. His sense of time was still fuzzy.

Where am I? he thought, vaguely. *When is this?*

Never mind that, what's happening to me?

Right in front of him was the back of Gilbert's curly black head. He could feel his body heat through his clothes, and the solidity of Gilbert's back. Gilbert was walking. Oz's legs weren't moving. They dangled in midair. Even so, he was traveling forward.

"Are you awake, Oz?"

At Gilbert's voice, which sounded a bit out of sorts, Oz woke up with a jolt.

He was being carried. Piggyback. By Gilbert.

—Hold it, he thought. *How did this happen?* He had absolutely no idea.

"Gil, what're you doing?!"

"What am I doing? Heading back to the mansion."

"Not *that*! Why are you carrying me?!"

"Don't you remember? You fell out of the tree."

"Huh……?"

Gilbert's words triggered a memory.

He'd climbed up the tree to catch the last mini-Alice. Just when he'd almost had her, all the strength had drained from his body and he'd fallen. He'd held the mini-Alice to his chest, and had been prepared to hit his head on the ground. That was all he could remember.

That's weird, Oz thought. For having smashed into the ground, he didn't feel—

When he got that far, he remembered the voice he'd heard, right before he passed out. *Oz!*

It had been Gilbert's voice. Even though Gilbert was supposed to be unconscious in Oz's room.

…He'd caught Oz.

If he'd been one step slower, Gilbert now said, he wouldn't have made it in time. Oz had no way to respond to that. When Gilbert next spoke, there was a note of pleading in his voice.

"Don't push yourself. Please."

"—"

I should probably say something to Gilbert, Oz thought. *Apologize, or thank him.*

Still, the words wouldn't come out. All sorts of feelings tangled together in his chest, sealing his mouth shut.

Gilbert was quiet for a little while, too. Then:

"I'm glad I made it in time."

He sounded immensely relieved. "—I'm sorry," Oz apologized, in a very, very small voice.

But immediately afterward, he yelled, "Aah!"

He'd shouted right in Gilbert's ear, and Gilbert winced, but Oz paid no attention. "Where's the last mini-Alice?" he asked.

"Gone," Gilbert said, briefly.

On reflex, Oz grabbed Gilbert's hair roughly.

"You erased her?! You forced—"

"No, that came out wrong. She ran off. I don't know where she went."

"Oh—" Oz was relieved.

Gilbert was carrying him down a path on Pandora grounds. It was the way back to the building.

Oz still needed to look for the mini-Alice, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to stop by his room first. Most of the mini-Alices had been turned back into strength, and had probably returned to Alice's body.

If Alice is at least a little bit better, he thought—

"Wait, that's not the problem here! Let me down, Gil!"

Oz began to struggle again, and Gilbert scolded him. "That's dangerous!"

"I told you, I'm fine! Put me down! What're you piggybacking me for?!"

"Not happening. I'm taking you back this way. All the way to your room."

"No! You! *Aren't!* I can walk by myself!"

Oz flailed at the back of Gilbert's head, halfheartedly, not putting any strength behind the blows.

Gilbert only answered, "You can't. You were pushing yourself. I know you're already at your limit."

Although he didn't raise his voice, it held a determined strength.

It was a moody voice, and it was clear that Gilbert had no intention of giving an inch.

Oz involuntarily swallowed his words. Gilbert continued, his tone angry.

"Why didn't you mention that you're sick, too?"

Oz closed his mouth. There was nothing he could say to that. After bumping along on Gil's back for a short while in silence, he muttered:

"You noticed."

"…Of course I did," Gilbert answered.

Back in Oz's room, when he was nursing Alice. When Oz had dipped up a spoonful of oatmeal and held it out to Alice, and Gilbert had caught his wrist. The difference had been subtle, but his temperature had been high. It wasn't something anyone else would have paid attention to if they'd caught his wrist that way. Besides:

"The worse you feel, the more enthusiastic you get… You're a real

piece of work."

Come to think of it, his eagerness to take care of Alice had been a sign, too.

"Well, I…" Oz hesitated, uncomfortably. "Alice's cold is…my fault."

His fault— Oz's instincts told him that was so, and he was sure it was true.

Oz had gotten sick late the previous evening. There was a book he'd wanted to read, so he'd stayed up late, and he'd been so engrossed in the book that he'd forgotten he'd left the window open. When he'd noticed he was chilled through, he'd hastily clambered into bed. …But.

At daybreak, he'd started to feel the symptoms of a mild cold. He'd thought he could shake them by sleeping in for a while.

When he found out that Alice had also caught a cold, he'd understood immediately.

Ordinarily, Chains didn't catch cold.

Alice had probably come down with cold symptoms because she was linked to him… Her contractor. Oz didn't know if the same thing happened to other contractors and their Chains, but even so.

"…I see. So you decided to take responsibility and take care of her… Dummy."

As he spoke, Gilbert's voice held a hint of laughter. Oz sulked, puffing out his cheeks and turning his face away.

"Golden snow…"

At Gilbert's abrupt murmur, Oz's breath caught. Gilbert continued.

"A long time ago, when we went to that wheat field. You hid the fact that you had a cold and ran around playing, and in the end, you collapsed."

"……Yeah…"

Going to the wheat field. Playing with Ada and Gilbert. Seeing that golden snow.

It was a fun memory, a nostalgic memory, but that wasn't all. It was painful, too.

Father's always hated me—

Even now, he didn't know the reason. …His father, Xai Vessalius, had seen him as something detestable from the time he was small, and Oz hadn't even been allowed to go out casually.

Personally, Oz was used to being treated that way. All he'd had to do was force down his own feelings so that he'd be able to accept whatever happened.

However, Ada was still little, and it hurt him that she had to feel cooped up as well. As her older brother, he felt he really should have been able to take her by the hand and show her all sorts of different places.

It was likely that Uncle Oscar hadn't been able to stand seeing the two of them like that, and that was why he'd made the suggestion to their father.

A few times each year, the House of Vessalius inspected the farms on its land. Oscar had told Oz's father that he wanted to take Oz and Ada along that year, and to bring Gilbert as their servant.

He couldn't imagine that his father had given his consent readily, but Oscar hadn't told him how he'd gotten him to agree, so Oz never did find out what had happened.

They wouldn't be spending the night. It was just a simple day trip.

Ada had never gone far from the mansion before, and she seemed absolutely thrilled. This had made Oz happy as well, and he'd accepted the invitation.

That day had been just like today. He'd felt a little sick in the morning, but he hadn't told anyone. —He'd hidden it.

If he backed out of the excursion, he knew his kindhearted little sister would probably stay home as well.

He hadn't wanted to make her do that.

And so, both before Oz arrived at the wheat field and after, he'd

acted as cheerful and merry as ever—no, even more so. He'd teased Gilbert. He'd held hands with Ada and run through the wheat field with her. He'd thought that as long as Ada was smiling and having fun, nothing else mattered.

And, when night fell, Oz had collapsed. —Out in the wheat field.

Back then, Gilbert hadn't noticed that Oz wasn't feeling well until he fell down, and he hadn't been big enough to carry Oz after he collapsed. From what Oz had heard, all he'd been able to do was panic and run calling for Uncle Oscar.

He'd been a kid then. Just like Oz.

And yet now—

He'd noticed the change in Oz, had come running just in the nick of time, had caught him and carried him.

On top of that, he'd even scolded Oz, telling him not to be reckless.

What gives…?

A complicated emotion was welling up inside him.

"—I was dreaming," Oz muttered. "I dreamed about that."

All Gilbert said was, "You did, hmm?"

Oz rested his forehead on Gilbert's shoulder, as if he was tired. He was hiding his face, even though Gilbert wouldn't have been able to see it anyway.

What gives…?

The same words surfaced in his mind. Thinking even to himself that he sounded like a spoiled little kid, Oz thought, chagrined:

How could he go and get this big without me…? That burns me up…

In the evening light, Gilbert's back smelled a little like the sun.

| 17:30 |

In the end, Gilbert carried Oz all the way back to his room.

When they got there, Alice was curled up in the down comforter, asleep. She might have been feeling a bit better, or possibly not; it was hard to say. Her color seemed slightly better, but her strength hadn't completely returned yet.

"…I've got to go look for that last Alice."

"No, you—"

Rest, Gilbert was about to say, but just then, a tiny shadow appeared on the bed.

It was the mini-Alice.

Her vague air of embarrassment, the way she fidgeted nervously, and her very un-Aliceness convinced Oz and Gilbert that she was that last mini-Alice. They were speechless; they hadn't expected her to turn up on her own.

The last mini-Alice gazed at Oz steadily. Then she ducked her head in a bow.

"Thank you for protecting me."

Back when he was falling out of the tree. *At the very least, I have to protect her*, he'd thought, and he'd desperately hugged her to his chest.

"You were very kind to me, and it made me happy, so… I'm going back to 'me.'"

"Alice—"

"They're all back inside 'me.' Once I go back, 'I'll' feel better."

The mini-Alice gave a soft, fragile smile. Neither Oz nor Gilbert had seen a smile like that on Alice's face before. Still, somehow, there was something about the smile that made it seem Alice-like.

The mini-Alice looked into Alice's sleeping face. "I'm home," she told her. Then, soundlessly, her body dissolved into sparks of light, and the sparks melted into Alice's body.

As if the return of the last fragment of strength had flipped a switch, Alice slowly opened her eyes. Then she sat up.

Still seeming a bit dazed, Alice gazed at Oz.

"It sounds like you took care of 'me,'" she murmured.

"Never mind tha—"

"While I was sleeping… I saw golden snow."

"Huh?"

At Alice's words, Oz's breath caught.

"That was your memory, wasn't it?"

Oz couldn't answer right away.

Alice had caught his cold because they were linked…because he was contracted to her. The idea had given him nothing but guilt. He'd felt that he needed to apologize to her. He'd been sure that when he told Alice the truth, she'd be mad, too.

But Alice said:

"I got to see something pretty. All because I'm linked to you."

She sounded shy…

And happy.

On hearing those words and seeing Alice's expression, an emotion Oz couldn't articulate welled up inside him.

Delight, relief, sympathy—it was a mixture of all of those, and he felt as if he'd tear up if he carelessly put it into words. …So Oz smiled cheerfully.

"Alice, you're better already?"

"Of course. As a matter of fact, I've powered up. …And actually…!"

As if she'd just now realized that Oz was riding on Gilbert's back, Alice's eyes went wide. She leaped out of bed.

"What are you doing way up there?! That looks like fun!"

Alice ran over, pointing at Oz, her voice excited. She stopped right in

front of Gilbert, held both arms up, and started hopping up and down. “Oz, switch with me! It’s my turn!” she demanded—pestered—begged impatiently.

For Oz’s part, even though up until this very moment he hadn’t been at all happy about being carried, he said, “What? Hmm, I dunno… This is pretty comfortable…”

At Alice’s reaction he put on a mischievous, weighty, worried expression. “That’s not fair, Oz!” Alice said, stamping her feet. “No fair, no fair!” she repeated.

“Mmm-hmm, what should I do…?” Oz said evasively.

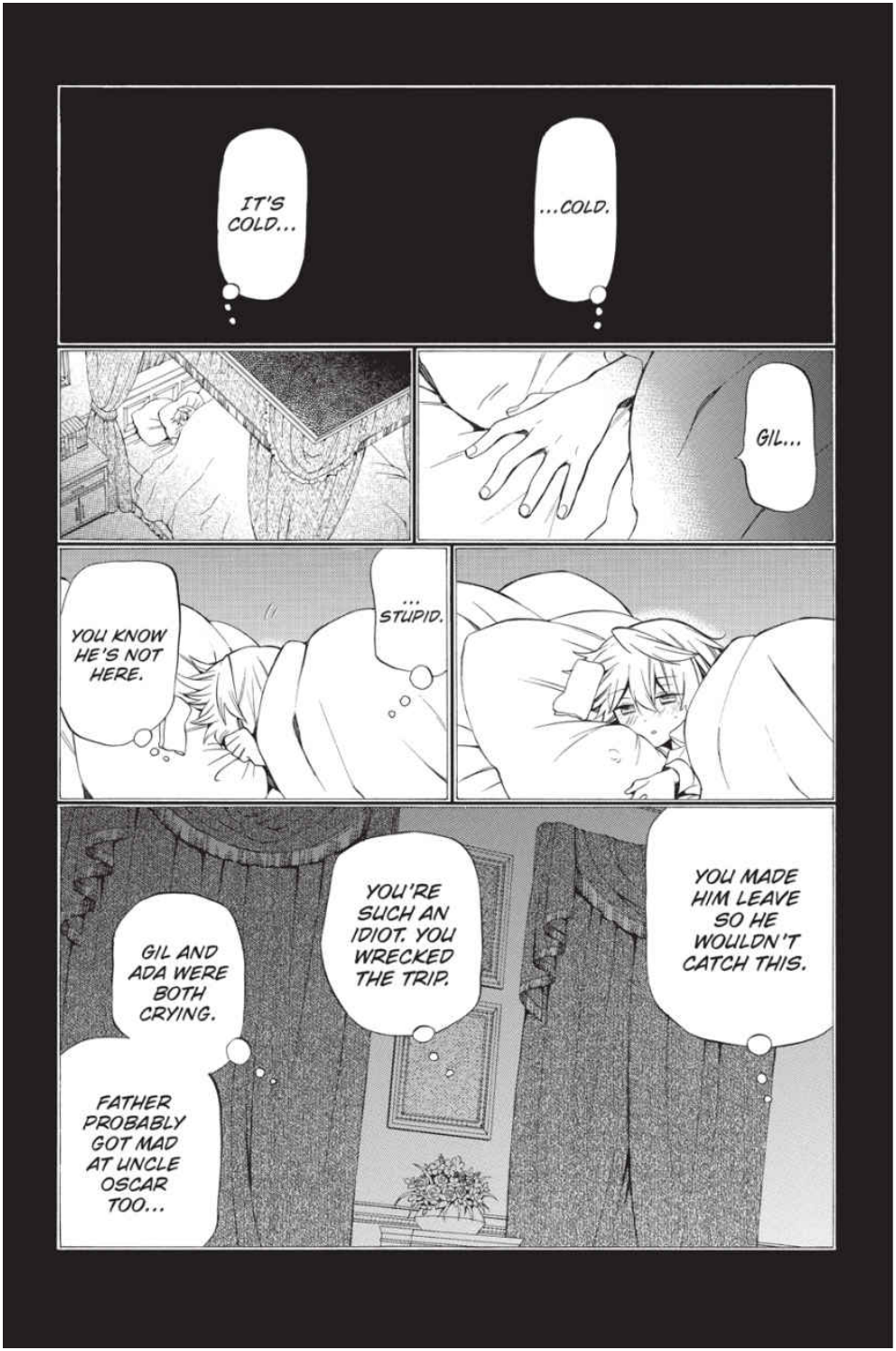
Finally, caught in the middle, Gilbert said in a worn-out voice, “Knock it off, you two.”

Even as he said it, he sighed.

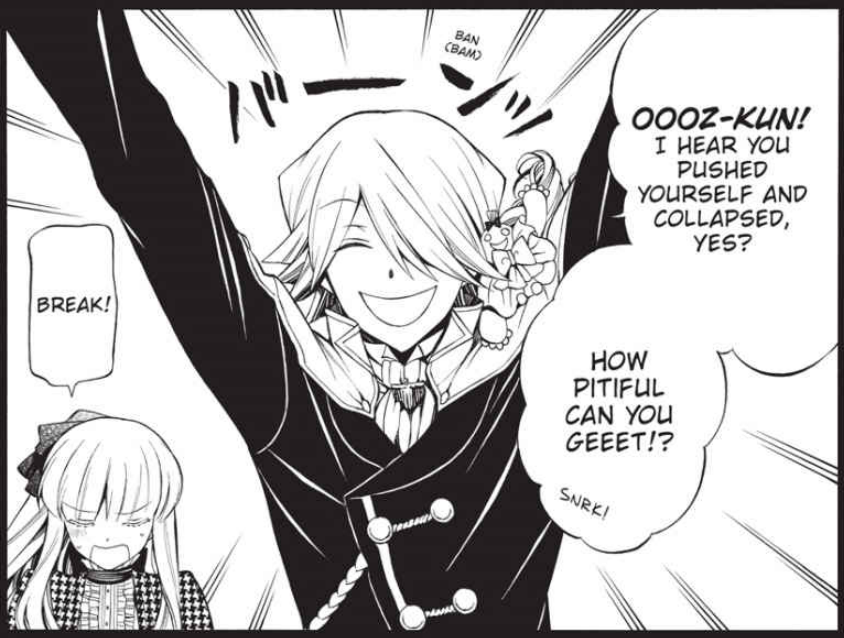
After that, of course, Oz gladly traded with Alice and climbed into bed himself.

As for Gilbert, he was forced to carry Alice around on his back and take care of Oz until late that night.

~Fin~


IT'S COLD...
...COLD.
GIL...
YOU KNOW HE'S NOT HERE.
... STUPID.
YOU MADE HIM LEAVE SO HE WOULDN'T CATCH THIS.
YOU'RE SUCH AN IDIOT. YOU WRECKED THE TRIP.
GIL AND ADA WERE BOTH CRYING.
FATHER PROBABLY GOT MAD AT UNCLE OSCAR TOO...

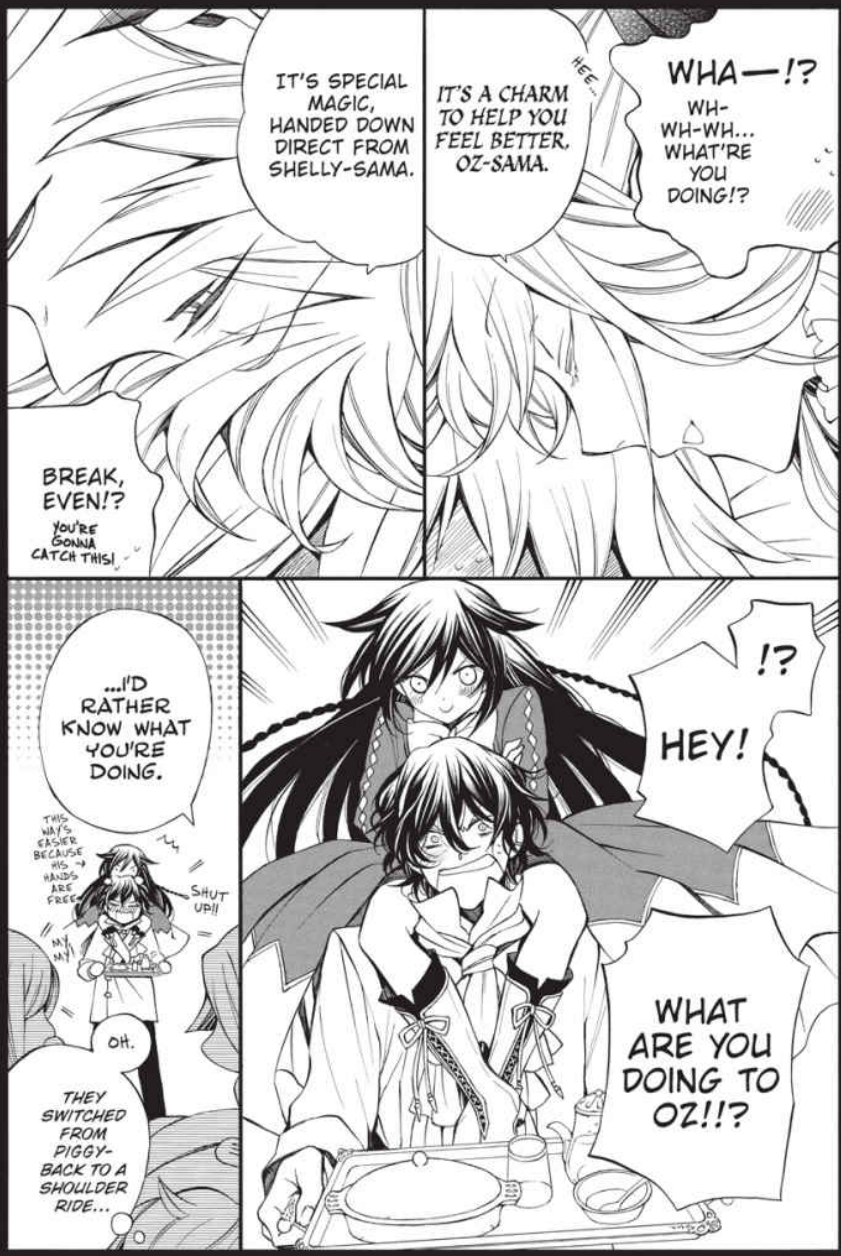
IDIOT.
STUPID.
THEY'RE PROBABLY ALL DISGUSTED WITH YOU.
I'M SORRY.
I'M SORRY. I'M SORRY.
WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS?
STUPID.
I'M SOR—
.....
A DREAM ...?



A SIDE EPISODE OF GOLDEN DROPS

AFTER THAT, MY TEMPERATURE... SORT OF SHOT UP ALL OF A SUDDEN...
I'M REALLY... SOR...
KOFF! KOFF!
HA HA...
APPARENTLY IT'S WORSE THAN I THOUGHT.
...MY APOLOGIES.
NOW, THERE'S A TEXTBOOK CASE OF INSECURITY ...
OH, BUT... WHAT IF MY FEVER DOESN'T GO DOW—
KOFF! KOFF!
KOFF!
I'M... SUCH A LOSER...
KOFF!
I KNOW... THIS IS NO TIME TO BE SLEEPING...
HMM? ME TOO?
OF COURSE! COME ON, HERE WE GO.
I SUPPOSE. IF I MUST.
ARRGH... HOW COULD I...?
CHHHHH
UUUUU
I'M CAUSING TROUBLE FOR ALL OF PANDORA, NOT JUST ALICE AND GIL.
NOT TO MENTION THAT IT'S ALL MY FAULT TO BEGIN WITH...

KOTSUN
(TUNK)
コツン


IT'S SPECIAL MAGIC, HANDED DOWN DIRECT FROM SHELLY-SAMA.
HEE...
IT'S A CHARM TO HELP YOU FEEL BETTER, OZ-SAMA.
WHA—!?
WH-WH-WH... WHAT'RE YOU DOING!?
BREAK, EVEN!?
YOU'RE GONNA CATCH THIS!
...I'D RATHER KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING.
THIS WAY'S EASIER BECAUSE HIS HANDS ARE FREE.
SHUT UP!!
MY, MY!
OH.
THEY SWITCHED FROM PIGGY-BACK TO A SHOULDER RIDE...
!?
HEY!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO OZ!!?

OH... MM... I'M FINE—
HOW ARE YOU FEELING, OZ?
ボフッ!
BOFU! (WHUMP)
HMPH.
HIYA (COOL)
ひや……
OH...
GIL'S HAND...
IT'S BIG AND COLD.
THAT FEELS GOOD...

OZ!
OZ, OZ.
ZUBOTSU (SHUNK)
!?
HERE, AAAAAH!
KOFF! KOFF! KOFF!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING, STUPID RABBIT!!?
OZ, ARE YOU OKAY!?
HE DID A LOT FOR ME!
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, "WHAT"? I'M JUST RETURNING THE FAVOR!
PAY HIM BACK SOME OTHER WAY!!

AAAH!
OH!
AAAH!
YOU SAY THAT, BUUUT...
... YOU REALLY WANT TO MAKE OZ-KUN SAY "AAAAH" YOURSELF.
I DO NOT!
IN THAT CASE, SHALL I MAKE OZ-SAMA SAY "AAAAH"?
LOOK, JUST ...!
I'M SAYING WE SHOULD FEED HIM NORMALLY.
OZ MADE ME SAY "AAAH"!
I SHOULD RETURN THE FAVOR IN THE EXACT SAME WA—
SHUT UP, STUPID RABBIT!
SNRK!
HA HA HA HA!
HA... HA HA HA HA!

HMM? NOTHING, NOTHING ...
HE HE HE HE...
WHAT'S THE MATTER?
O... OZ...?
IT'S SO WARM.....
FUNYA (MUMBLE)
FUNYA

The Story
of
THE NIGHTRAYS

BLACK WIDOW

Heart Shadow

1

“Would you investigate this Miss Garland for me?”

One day, in a room at the Nightray manor, Echo’s master Vincent gave her a single photograph and issued an order.

Dahlia Garland.

It was a name she’d never heard before. A face she’d never seen.

The Garland mansion was located on the outskirts of Reveil, the capital.

For an aristocratic residence, it was relatively small. Standing in the woods, surrounded by trees of deep green, the modest mansion seemed a bit like the hideaway of a witch who’d turned her back on the world.

Up in one of the elms that ringed the property, Echo was watching the window of a second-story room from the shadow of the green leaves. Her face, which still held something childlike, was as expressionless as a doll’s, and she was so quiet that it was hard to tell whether she was breathing.

Her unwavering gaze was fixed on one point.

That point was a woman. She sat in a rocking chair by a window whose lace curtains were open, completely exposing the room beyond. She was reading.

This lady, with her long black hair and slightly shadowed expression, was Dahlia Garland.

That’s a very thick book, Echo thought to herself. *What could she be reading?*

Her expression didn’t flicker.

Not that Echo is interested…

She’d begun her surveillance an hour ago.

For the whole of that hour, Dahlia had been sitting by the window, in the same attitude, absorbed in that book. For all that time, Echo had continued her surveillance without making the slightest movement, and Dahlia’s slender fingers had continued tirelessly turning pages. Echo thought she might intend to spend the entire day that way.

According to the information she’d received from Vincent beforehand, Dahlia was nineteen years old, and the Garland family’s only daughter.

The Garlands weren’t all that influential socially, but they had a long

history, and even aristocrats in the upper echelons of society acknowledged their superiority. The current head of the family, Dansen Garland, was already getting on in years. Dahlia had been born to him late in life, and her mother had already passed away.

It was possible that the mansion didn't employ many servants, either: During the time Echo had been watching, no one had visited Dahlia's room.

"That aside," Echo murmured, her expression as unchanging as ever, "…she's lovely."

Echo wasn't the type to be easily swayed by appearances, either of people or things, yet this woman had won even Echo's admiration.

It wasn't simply that she had pretty features. There was a certain delicacy about her, something ephemeral, as if she might break at the slightest touch.

It could also have been the untraceable scent of danger.

Echo thought back over the conversation she'd had with her master before leaving the Nightray manor.

"Why are you investigating her?"

Echo never refused orders from Vincent, and she usually didn't ask questions. However, as she looked at the photograph she'd been handed, she had spoken, unexpectedly.

In the photograph, Dahlia was looking straight at the viewer, her gaze listless. It might have been the tinge of melancholy in her eyes that had caught at Echo's heart.

Even as she asked the question, Echo didn't expect a proper answer.

Vincent, her master, was a secretive person, and in addition, he saw Echo as nothing more than a convenient tool. Echo was well aware of that. She knew that was all she was: someone who simply accepted her master's orders, without question or comment.

…But Vincent did answer.

"Because she's a venemous insect."

"A venemous insect?"

"Yes. A venemous insect that's defiling something important to me. …So you see…"

"…"

"I have to eliminate that bug."

"Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee." Vincent giggled happily. Then he seemed to lose interest in talking. As if he'd tired of speaking with Echo, he yawned and lay down on the sofa.

He'd closed his eyes, and for a short while, Echo had gazed at him wordlessly. Finally, though, she'd turned and left. Then, guided by the address written on the back of the photograph she'd been given, she'd made for the Garland mansion, heading toward the outskirts of Reveil.

Still—

As motionless as a statue, Echo thought.

There isn't much point in staying here longer.

If Echo was a statue, then Dahlia was as changeless as a painting titled *Lady Reading Book by Window*.

For Echo, it wouldn't have been difficult to spend the whole day this way, but she wanted to avoid returning to the Nightray manor empty-handed. Just as she was beginning to consider infiltrating the mansion… Dahlia closed her book with a soft thump and looked up. She glanced at a point in her room, as if to confirm something.

Then her lips moved slightly, and she rose from the rocking chair. She looked slightly flustered.

"'Time'…?" Echo murmured; she'd read Dahlia's lips. The woman seemed to be concerned about the time.

Echo wondered whether she had an engagement of some sort.

Dahlia set her book on the side table, stood up from her chair and started toward the door that was visible at the back of the room.

However, she paused abruptly, then returned to the window. She reached for the curtains, closing them slowly. Just before they closed completely, Dahlia glanced through the thin gap in the curtains. She was looking outside the window, at the elm trees that surrounded the manor. In Echo's direction.

…*She noticed me? She can't have*, Echo thought. It had to be just a coincidence.

But then, right before the curtains closed…

Dahlia looked straight at Echo and gave a faint smile.

2

—"Ten years."

It was easy to say, but it felt like an extraordinarily long time.

Let's see, in days that would be… And in hours, it's—

Oz tried to work out the arithmetic in his head, but decided it wasn't worth the effort and gave up.

He sat on a sofa in an office in Pandora Headquarters, hugging a cushion to his chest and watching Gilbert's profile as he spoke with Reim Lunettes.

Traces of the old Gilbert still remained—his curly black hair, his slightly almond-shaped eyes—but his features and his height were emphatically those of an adult. Ten years… That was the amount of time that had passed between Oz's fall into the Abyss and his return. The amount of time by which Gilbert had left him behind.

He smokes…

That ten-year blank.

He's gotten good at shooting…

That ten-year blank.

He uses a tougher pronoun…

That ten-year blank.

"…?" Registering Oz's gaze, Gilbert turned.

His expression seemed to ask *What's wrong?*, but Oz didn't pay any attention. He kept studying his valet's grown-up face. He gazed steadily, or rather, dazedly.

"Wh-what, Oz? Is there something on my face?" Gilbert put a hand up to touch his cheek, looking slightly bewildered.

"Yes," Oz answered, simply.

"Huh? What, sauce from the pasta I had at lunch—?"

"Eyes, a nose, and a mouth."

"…Hey."

"What?"

"It would be weird if those *weren't* there."

"You asked. I told you."

"Only that wasn't what I meant when I asked you."

"Oh. Eyebrows, too."

"Now look here…" Gilbert said, sighing.

"And? Were you done with your discussion, Gil?"

Reim, who'd been watching Oz and Gilbert's pointless exchange, answered in Gilbert's place. "Yes," he said, with a wry smile. "We've finished, Oz-sama."

Oz hadn't been paying attention, and he didn't know what they'd been talking about. He hadn't had anything in particular to do today, so he'd looked in at the office to gloat about it. Oz responded to Reim with an apathetic "…Hmm."

"Gil, what are you doing next? If you're done with work…"

"No, I, uh, I'm going to see Break next—"

"…Break?" Oz echoed, a bit dubiously.

Break wasn't one of Gilbert's favorite people. They weren't exactly sworn enemies, but Gilbert wouldn't actively seek him out if he didn't have business with him.

Oz thought Break might have summoned Gilbert. When he asked, though, Gilbert answered a bit evasively: "No, that…isn't it."

Oz cocked his head to one side, perplexed by Gilbert's reaction.

"Maybe I'll go with you, then."

"D-d-d-d-don't you dare…!!"

Gilbert shook his head violently, turning him down with tremendous force.

Oz hadn't expected to be refused, and the ferocity set him blinking, but it didn't take him long to pick up the scent. There was something interesting here.

It wasn't anything important, Gilbert explained, obviously trying to cover up the confusion he wasn't quite able to hide. If Oz came along, he said, he'd only be bored.

"Hmm. I see. I guess I won't, then."

When, smiling brightly, Oz told him he'd go back to his room, Gilbert was visibly relieved.

As he sensed the intent behind Oz's smile, Reim's expression changed slightly. Privately, he seemed to sympathize with Gilbert.

When they stepped from the office into the hallway, Oz waved goodbye to Gilbert. As Gilbert hurried away down the hall, Oz kept waving at his receding back. Smiling, he called, "See you later, Gil."

Gilbert said, "Yeah," waved back a bit apologetically, and left.

Even after he was out of sight, Oz kept waving.

"…I really will see you later, Gil."

He beamed.

3

Gilbert Nightray, aged twenty-four.

Son of the noble House of Nightray, one of the four great dukedoms.

As far as looks went, he was a handsome young man with a sharp air about him.

When he made appearances at social functions, his figure and reticent attitude stole the hearts of many fine ladies.

At balls, he received countless invitations from the fairer sex.

However, Gilbert hardly ever responded to these invitations.

His chilliness only served to raise his reputation among the women of the aristocracy.

Not that Gilbert wanted or intended any such thing. …Quite the opposite, in fact.

"Well, *well.* Congratulations!"

Break applauded. Glowering, Gilbert retorted, "…There's nothing good about it."

The two of them were facing each other in one of Pandora Headquarters' many reception rooms, one that was often used for conducting clandestine meetings. To augment his applause, Break took a party cracker out of an inner pocket and was just about to pull it when he seemed to realize something.

"This makes for a nice, round thirty, doesn't it? Although there's been *quite* a gap since the twenty-ninth…"

"Don't ask me. I don't keep track."

“Requests to socialize with an eye to marriage—just what I’d expect from a distinguished aristocrat. What a popular fellow *you* are.”

“…I wish they wouldn’t.”

The four great dukes—Barma, Nightray, Rainsworth, and Vessalius—were high-ranking aristocrats with great authority.

Many nobles and important merchants approached the dukes in the hopes of somehow currying favor. The surest way to do so was to join their two houses—in other words, to marry in. This meant it wasn’t particularly unusual for the sons of the dukes to be flooded with requests to socialize.

It had been about ten years since Gilbert went from being a servant of the House of Vessalius to an adopted son of the House of Nightray. He’d received many such requests. However, nearly all of these applications had been turned down by the Nightray family due to the applicants’ social status and other such reasons.

That said, a few requests had made it across that high barrier and reached Gilbert himself.

Twenty-nine so far, according to Break.

The latest request, which Gilbert had received the other day, brought the total to thirty.

“There hadn’t been any for the past couple of years. I’d finally started to relax…”

Gilbert felt like lodging a complaint or two with someone.

“*My*, that takes me back. You were, what, sixteen or so?”

Break had a faraway look in his eyes. Gilbert, forced to remember past trauma, groaned.

Gilbert had made his social debut as a member of the House of Nightray at sixteen.

That year, a fever of excitement had blazed through high society.

The appearance of a dark, handsome young man with a shadow about him had thrilled the ladies of the aristocracy, and afterward, Gilbert had received an astronomical number of requests to socialize. During that year alone, Gilbert had personally met more than ten women.

Gilbert had had zero immunity to such things, and he’d immediately been plunged into a whirlpool of confusion.

Back then, the person he’d gone to for help (and oh, how he’d lived to regret it!) was Break.

The villainous schemer who’d sent Gilbert to the House of Nightray with the suggestion that they use each other.

“When I close my eye, I can see it so clearly! Your face, as you came to me for help… ☆”

“Don’t remember stuff like that!”

“You looked ready to burst into tears. You were blushing, embarrassed… ‘I cannot even imagine seeing someone with the intent to marry her, but I have no idea how to turn them down without causing

them shame…' You were such an earnest, *good* little boy, Gilbert-kun."

"Knock. It. *Oooooooooooff!!*"

Gilbert howled with enough force to wring Break's head clean off his neck, but Break's expression was composed.

"I came to you with a serious problem, and you turned it into a game __"

"I did *absolutely nothing* of the sort!" Break said, sounding wounded. "As a matter of fact, when you did as I told you, it went well, didn't it? I gave you those strategies for your own good, you know."

"Yeah, right," Gilbert spat, growling.

How to make the other party give up naturally, without turning them down directly?

At the time, Gilbert hadn't even managed to fully accept Oz's disappearance. He'd had no hope of coming up with any decent ways to handle the situation on his own.

Gilbert had gone to Break for advice, and had been given several strategies. Being Gilbert, and young, he'd carried them all out conscientiously. Looking back now, he thought he'd been an idiot, but it was also true that he'd had nothing else to try.

He didn't want to remember, but he certainly couldn't forget.

"…You made me pretend I had weird fetishes… Made me two-time so that I was sure to get caught… And you…"

No matter how little he wanted to remember it, the very worst memory rose in his mind.

He couldn't remember the woman's face or name anymore, but he vividly recalled the sound of her angry voice. That voice had hurt his heart as well as his ears.

"What is this, *Gilbert-sama?!"*

"What…? It is a letter…to you…"

"It most certainly is not! This wasn't written to me! Look!"

"I-I am sorry. Umm."

"That alone would be unforgivable, but just look at this…this…this filthy *content!"*

"…I-is it really such an odd letter…?"

"Shameless wretch! Here, I'll read it for you. 'Ah, Ada-sama, your lovely form sends my poor heart mad.'"

"Whaaaaaaaat?!"

"That's not all! 'Ah, lady, like a bud that has yet to blossom… I want to worship you for eternity.' Y-you're the lowest of the low!"

"I-I-I-I-I-I did not write that…"

"Pervert!!"

Following Break's instructions, Gilbert had handed the woman a love letter to Ada and pretended that it had been an accident.

Not only that, but Break had written the depraved missive, and he hadn't told Gilbert what was in it beforehand.

Several other, similar things had happened, and finally…

As he carried out various schemes, even Gilbert began to have his doubts:

"Um, Break…"

"I hear the ladies are leaving according to plan. I'm so happy for you!"

"Th-that's true…but, um, I feel…"

"??? What do you feel?"

"At the same time, I feel as if I'm losing something important…"

"Something important?"

"Y-yes. It's hard to describe…"

"It's just your imagination. You're actually well on your way up the stairway to adulthood. ☆"

"…Am I really?"

"Yes, yes. Now, for the next strategy—"

He'd found himself in some terrible scrapes.

Gilbert thought it was a wonder his reputation in aristocratic society hadn't been ruined.

"…Huh…? In that case, why am I asking him for help again…?"

As Gilbert muttered, he stared at the wall with an expression of gloom.

It kept him from noticing.

Gazing at Gilbert. Break's expression sharpened abruptly, and he added, under his breath, "Well, it seems I wasn't the only one moving in the shadows… Your little brother, for one."

In the next instant, Break broke into a smile that made him seem truly reliable.

"Well, never you mind. Thanks to that, you got by without having to court anyone. All's well that ends well."

"Th-that's true…but…"

Gilbert grimaced and put up a hand, pinching the bridge of his nose, right between his eyes. He couldn't bring himself to agree willingly.

True, thanks to Break, Gilbert—who wasn't at all used to dealing with women—had managed to keep himself single without caving to external pressure. Possibly the proposal boom was over—although he still drew notice at social functions, he hadn't gotten any actual requests to socialize for the past few years.

Oh. That's why, when this one came in out of the blue, I automatically went to Break for help—

Privately, he regretted it. He felt as if he'd made a thunderingly bad decision.

Still, at the very least, he'd managed to throw Oz off the scent. He

thought he deserved a pat on the back for that.

For better or worse, Break was the only person he could go to for advice in matters like this, and, more than anything, he wanted to keep the fact that he *had* gone to Break for advice a complete secret.

…Particularly from that master of his, who had no qualms about publically declaring that his hobby was valet-baiting.

Gilbert swore a private oath to himself.

I never want Oz to find out about this… Anyone but Oz…!! Even if it kills me!

"And? Who's the lucky lady *this* time?"

"…Dahlia Garland. Apparently she isn't from a major house, but her family is distinguished—"

"So he says, Oz-kun. Do you know her?"

"Mmmmm, the name doesn't ring any bells."

Oz, who seemed to have popped out of nowhere to stand beside Break, folded his arms and put his head to one side, as though deep in thought.

"I see…" Gilbert nodded. "Well, I'd never heard of her, either."

"Even if she's an aristocrat, there are plenty of those around," said Oz.

"Right. She might have said hello to me at a party once, but I don't remember everyone who… Hmm?"

"Hmm? What's wrong, Gil?" Oz said.

"*Oz—?!*"

Gil nearly died of shock.

In response, Oz raised a hand, greeting him with a casual "Hey." Gilbert's mouth flapped uselessly; the words wouldn't come. Oz pouted, sulking a little; it looked contrived. "Why didn't you tell me? That was cold."

Gilbert fought to keep his composure, and failed. He was clearly flustered.

"Y-y-y-you… Oz! How long have you been there?!"

"The whole time. I was sitting behind Break, back to back, listening."

—After he'd parted with Gilbert in the hall, Oz explained, he'd rushed around and gotten ahead of him. "And it worked! ☆" he said, flashing a V for victory. Too late, Gilbert remembered that Oz would easily go that far to startle him. The thought of his own carelessness dragged him into a depression lower than the ocean floor.

"So Gil's been popular for a long time?"

"Hasn't he *just*! Between his family and his looks, he's prime real estate, you know. On top of that, I think the combination of his cold appearance and those vaguely melancholy eyes tends to tickle feminine hearts. And then, every time someone makes advances, young Gilbert comes crying to *me*…"

"Lucky! That sounds like fun!" Oz said, delivering that heinous

remark with a bright smile.

Gilbert felt an overwhelming desire to disappear.

"So, Gil, what's this Dahlia lady like? Is she pretty?" Oz's expression was excited.

"…No idea," Gilbert said, uncooperatively.

"Don't you at least have a photograph?" Oz asked.

"N-no." Gilbert shook his head.

"Aaaah, this is it! Here you go."

Break had a photograph pinched between his fingertips—who knew where he'd pulled it from—and he held it out to Oz.

Taking the photo, Oz exclaimed, "Wow, she's gorgeous!"

With a start, Gilbert pressed a hand to the breast pocket of his jacket, where he'd been carrying the photograph. "Break, when did you—?!" he yelled. Break just smirked smugly.

Gilbert stretched a hand out toward Oz—"Give it back!"—but Oz dodged gracefully, still examining the photograph.

"Matched brunets," he muttered, and then, in a very casual tone: "Say, Gil. Are you going to go out with her?"

"…No. Don't be stupid."

"Huh. What a waste."

It was hard to tell how serious Oz was. "Just drop it," Gilbert mumbled.

This is exactly what's meant by "The master knows not what his valet's heart holds," he thought. Just as he was beginning to think that, for now, he had to figure out a way to muddy the waters and make his escape, Oz struck his own chest with a thump. With an absolutely brilliant smile, he said, "Well, if that's how it is, Gil, I understand. Just leave it to me!"

Oz flashed a sharp thumbs-up and continued, ignoring Gilbert, who'd been rendered speechless.

"If his valet is in trouble, it's a master's duty to do something about it! Right?"

"My, *my*. The *paragon* of masters, Oz-kun, that's you. I'll help," Brake chimed in, applauding, and the two of them put their heads together right away and began making plans of some sort. Gilbert could only stand there, aghast. This was going in the worst possible direction.

As he spoke with Break, Oz looked happy through and through. That gave Gilbert an awful feeling, too.

If this keeps up, it's going to be a disaster.

…And so.

On reflex, Gilbert roared, "I-I-I'll handle this one myself! I'm not who I used to be!"

At those words, Oz and Break both broke into warm smiles.

As you'd expect, their expressions said:

Now *things are getting interesting!*

When, concerned about the time, Dahlia had left her mansion, she'd made her way to a dressmaker's shop on a narrow lane one block down from Reveil's high street.

The boutique Night Butterfly.

As the shop's name suggested, the show window was hung with evening dresses meant to be worn at soirees. The designs were showy and provocative: Most of the gowns had plunging necklines and gaping backs, and all were the sort that would attract men's eyes. They might easily have been made for just that purpose.

Echo, who was lurking on the roof of the antique store opposite the boutique and had watched Dahlia enter the shop, glanced at the dresses and gave her murmured impression:

"…Gaudy."

Her voice held no emotion, but she meant the words from the bottom of her heart.

…Really, though—

Echo was a bit puzzled. The array of dresses in the shop seemed to clash terribly with Dahlia's quiet demeanor.

"Or," she muttered, "could it be…? Are women like her the type who are most likely to cut loose at night…?"

She didn't know. Echo couldn't begin to understand what was supposed to be fun about wearing an audacious dress and attracting male glances in the first place. *But*, she thought, *maybe Echo thinks that way because Echo is only a tool, and ordinarily, women take pleasure in attracting attention from men.*

Hmm…

Echo folded her arms and tried to imagine it: Herself, at a soiree, dressed in a sophisticated gown that practically reeked of pheromones. An endless stream of gentlemen called to her, and she met them coldly, managed them, appraised them.

Only one fortunate gentleman would make it through this strict selection and win the right to be her partner.

For example:

"Hello, Eko-chan. You're particularly enchanting this evening."

"—!!"

Startled by Oz's surprise appearance at her imaginary soiree, Echo choked and lost her balance.

She nearly toppled right off the roof, but at the last minute, she somehow managed to catch herself. She'd made quite a clatter, and she wondered uneasily whether they'd heard her inside the antique store. When, however, she'd waited a little while and no one had come out, she gave a small sigh of relief.

At the same time, she began to feel irritated.

Wh-wh-why did Oz-sama show up there? Echo doesn't really…

As Echo thought this, her cheeks went red.

She shook her head, chasing away Oz—who had obstinately taken up residence in her brain and was wearing a truly first-class smile—and turned her attention back to the boutique.

It hadn't been very long since Dahlia had gone in. Echo didn't care that much about her own appearance, but she did know that women took time to choose clothes. Echo didn't mind waiting. She settled down on the roof of the antique store, made herself unnoticeable, held very still, and waited.

An hour passed. Still, Dahlia showed no sign of leaving the shop.

Is she still picking out clothes? …Wishy-washy… Echo thought, a little disgusted.

It wouldn't hurt to make sure. She climbed down to the street. A new customer—a lady with excellent timing—was just about to enter the shop, so Echo strolled past, pretending to be a passerby, and shot a quick glance inside through the open door.

As far as she could see, the only person there was the shop attendant. Echo's heart skipped a beat. *She's gone?*

But in the next instant, Dahlia surfaced from the recesses of the shop. Hastily putting some distance between herself and the boutique, Echo slipped into a nearby shadow and hid.

Dahlia's cheeks were faintly flushed. Maybe she was happy over a bargain she'd found. She passed Echo without noticing her and walked away, down the street. …Just as Dahlia passed, Echo caught an odd scent drifting from her.

It was very faint…and yet…

That's… But…

It was a scent Echo was used to, but the circumstances made it hard to identify.

The smell of…blood—?

Nothing about Dahlia's day after she returned to the mansion was particularly unusual.

Once she'd confirmed that Dahlia had gone to bed, Echo returned to the Nightray manor.

When Echo entered the drawing room, Vincent was lying on the sofa, gazing absently up at the ceiling.

He might not have been thinking about anything at all. It was just as likely that he was plotting something nefarious.

Echo was in Vincent's service, but she didn't understand her master's inner workings. —Somewhere, hidden deep down, was the feeling that she was afraid to understand.

"Echo has returned, Vincent-sama," she called.

Her back was to the door; she'd closed it behind her without turning. At her voice, Vincent's face turned toward her.

"Welcome back, Echo. Come here…"

He beckoned, and Echo crossed to the sofa. Then Echo noticed the small, charmingly wrapped box on the table in front of the sofa. As if he'd registered Echo's gaze, Vincent said, "It's from her," in a cold voice. "Homemade cookies and biscuits, apparently…"

At the word "her," the face of the Vessalius woman Vincent had been seeing lately appeared in Echo's mind. Ada Vessalius.

Echo knew Ada was Oz's little sister. She also knew Vincent certainly wasn't seeing her because he liked her.

"Just dispose of those for me, would you, Echo?"

Vincent spoke as if he couldn't have cared less. He added something spiteful about how they might have powdered newt in them, but Echo didn't really understand that bit. She just nodded, silently.

"So? How did things look?"

"Yes, sir—"

Dahlia's actions, or at least her actions today, had been quite ordinary.

However, the strangeness she'd sensed here and there—how was she to report that?

Echo began to speak, organizing her thoughts as she did so.

Dahlia had read a book all day, she told him, starting in the morning. She'd left the house once to go to a boutique, and after returning, she'd spent the rest of the day fairly monotonously.

After she finished speaking, Vincent muttered, "…No flaws that would make it easy to ruin her socially, then…" He sounded bored.

Then he glanced at Echo.

"What else? Anything you can think of…"

At Vincent's question, although she still didn't know how to explain it, Echo reported it:

The scent of blood she'd picked up from Dahlia when she left the boutique.

On hearing that, although Vincent's bored expression didn't change, a faint shadow of joy stole onto his lips.

"Is that right…" he said. "How interesting…"

That was all.

"Hello, Gil. I hear you're meeting her tomorrow…?"

When Gilbert visited the Nightray manor and walked into the dressing room, he found Vincent sprawled on the sofa, as if lying in wait.

Vincent didn't specify whom Gil would be meeting, but it was clear he meant Dahlia Garland. Dahlia's request to socialize had come

through the House of Nightray, so it wasn't odd that Vincent knew about it.

"…Yeah."

Gilbert kept his answer short; he wasn't in the mood for a long conversation. He'd come back to the manor to pick up some clothes to wear to his meeting with Dahlia. He didn't keep any formal clothes of the sort he could wear to meet a noblewoman in his bachelor's apartment.

"You don't look very cheerful… You're not looking forward to it, Gil?"

"Not particularly. I'm just meeting her to turn her down. There's nothing 'fun' or 'not fun' about that."

"Hmm. So you're turning her down…"

"Of course I am."

"For the sake of your little master…?"

"—"

The longer he talked to this brother of his, the more bogged down he'd get. Knowing this, Gilbert let his silence answer for him and got to work choosing formal clothes.

Dahlia had said that, if he didn't mind, she would prefer to meet in town. As a general rule, when two noble houses were involved, it was normal to begin by greeting each other properly at one family's house. However, Gilbert appreciated the lack of formality, and he'd had no objections.

In addition, she'd said that she'd rather meet casually, without trying to put up a front for each other. The thought that, in that case, his ordinary clothes might be good enough had crossed Gilbert's mind, but the roughness of those ordinary clothes had made him reconsider.

Casual is good, but… I really am meeting her, huh…?

At first, he'd thought about turning her down through a letter or something and ending it that way.

He couldn't even consider seeing a lady socially, and Gilbert didn't care two pins for the House of Nightray's reputation. In that case, a letter would be the simplest way to do things, and it would also be the easiest on his nerves.

However, Gilbert had decided to meet her properly and turn her down. This had been partly due to his own serious nature, but even more to one of Oz's teachings that he'd taken to heart:

"Always treat women with kindness and sincerity!"

As he thought back over this and that and grabbed a random suit:

"Shall I help you pick out clothes?"

Gilbert turned down Vincent's teasing offer with a brusque "No need."

As he absently chose clothes, he thought about Dahlia. Had she spoken to him at a party? He didn't remember it. Still, if she had, the

fact that he'd forgotten it was rude in and of itself. On top of that, Gilbert had already made up his mind to turn her down.

This is depressing…

Gilbert didn't understand women.

That said, he was fairly sure that any woman would be hurt if she requested permission to formally socialize and was turned down.

He did know that much. And tomorrow, he'd be doing exactly that.

Even as he slipped into a gloomy mood with a fair measure of guilt mixed in, Gilbert roused himself.

I'll do it. I can do that much on my own now…!

He'd already run several mental simulations since leaving Oz and Break at Pandora. After making such a dramatic declaration, he *had* to do it, no matter what. He told himself that letting those two get involved would make the situation much, much worse, so it was easier to tackle it himself. Gilbert seemed quite busy: depressed, head hanging, a black suit in hand, then muttering to himself, then looking up and rousing himself to action. Through it all, Vincent watched him lovingly.

"Later, Vince."

Having calmed down, Gilbert was on his way out of the dressing room. Vincent yawned and lazily fluttered a hand at him.

"Oh, that's right. Gil…"

Vincent spoke to Gilbert's back. Gilbert didn't turn.

"What?"

"Take care you don't get eaten…"

"???"

"—All women are venemous spiders, you know."

"'All' is going too far."

With that reproving retort, Gilbert left the dressing room. As he walked down the corridor, his face cold and expressionless, questions swirled through his head.

Why had his little brother said a thing like that? That all women were "venemous spiders." …That they all had venom.

No doubt some women were like that, Gilbert thought, but there were also women who weren't. He knew one. A woman made entirely of kindness, cheer, and grace.

A woman who was worlds apart from "venom."

Ada-sama—

As he silently called her name, his heart grew warm. That wasn't venom. On the contrary, it was medicine.

That aside, because he was walking while absorbed in thought…

Gilbert, who knew the Nightray manor like the back of his hand, got lost.

"—Your precious Ada-sama is no exception, Gil."

Back in the dressing room, dozing, engulfed in drowsiness, Vincent murmured to himself.

"…But don't worry. I'll get rid of any flies that come buzzing around you…"

Just as he'd always done.

A smile of dark joy crept over Vincent's face. …*But*, he thought. From what Echo's report had told him, this particular fly seemed a bit different from the flies that had come before it. In that case, it might be interesting to watch the situation play out, at least for a little while.

As he thought, Vincent fell asleep.

…And, finally…

Echo, who'd entered the dressing room in search of her master, gazed at his peaceful, sleeping, smiling face. In a very, very small voice, she muttered:

"……He looks evil when he sleeps."

5

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm not very good with formalities."

That was the first thing Dahlia said to Gilbert when they met the following day, at noon, in the park they'd designated as their meeting place.

In person, Dahlia's quiet air was even more pronounced than her photograph had suggested.

When she stood, she seemed like a slender, shade-blooming flower that could be plucked easily by hand.

To Gilbert, she seemed to stand quietly, self-effacingly, unfurling delicate petals in secret.

When he thought back, comparing them, most of the women who'd made earlier requests to socialize had actively approached Gilbert. Even if they hadn't, they'd eyed him appreciatively with bold, sticky stares. Both types had made Gilbert utterly miserable.

Dahlia wasn't like either.

After she apologized, she didn't seem to have anything to say. She looked down, turning her gaze from Gilbert, and fell silent.

In its own way, this bewildered Gilbert.

"…" Silent Dahlia.

Maintaining a superficial calm, Gilbert kept his mouth shut.

I-I have no idea how to deal with this!

It was beginning to make him feel dizzy.

On a weekday, at noon, in a corner of a sparsely populated park, an aristocratic couple sat facing each other in silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

A fresh breeze blew through the park, caressing the trees and setting the leaves rustling. But the two of them were—

Silent.

Silent.

……Silent.

What am I supposed to do?! Is it all right to start turning her down now?! Gilbert asked himself.

If anyone who'd known him for a long time and knew him well were to see him now—

His face was pale, his mouth was drawn, and his internal confusion was gushing out all over the place.

If this was how it was going to be, Gilbert thought, it was better to broach the subject right away and get it over with. He opened his mouth.

"Um, listen—"

"Gilbert-sama."

"……?! Wh-what is it?" She'd gotten the jump on him in a matter-of-fact voice, and he felt his heart jump guiltily.

"Shall we stroll for a bit?"

Dahlia looked up, smiling faintly. Bewildered, Gilbert could only nod.

True, endlessly facing each other in silence this way was strange. Side by side, the two of them started down a footpath that wove through the wide park.

However, once they'd started walking, Dahlia fell silent again. For his part, Gilbert was badly flustered, and the words wouldn't come. As they walked, they kept a subtle distance between them, a space just large enough for a child. *What in the world is this?* Gilbert thought.

Not good…

He thought desperately. He thought, but:

I…have no idea how to get started!

Gilbert's mind was a small boat tossed by raging waves.

Two people, strolling along in silence.

"I'm sorry, Gilbert-sama. —Have I inconvenienced you?"

"Huh?"

Dahlia had spoken rather abruptly, but Gilbert somehow managed to keep his voice from cracking when he responded.

"My father…decided the matter for me. I didn't know what to do, either."

Dahlia's words reached Gilbert's ears, then slowly sank into his heart.

At Gilbert's sudden unresponsiveness, Dahlia tilted her head slightly, perplexed.

Finally, on a sigh, Gilbert said, "—I see." As far as his actual feelings

were concerned, those words had brought him relief so potent that he very nearly sank to the ground.

This sort of thing wasn't uncommon in aristocratic society. Women in particular often found themselves in marriages that had been orchestrated without regard for their wishes.

Unlike the previous cases, Dahlia hadn't asked for permission to see Gilbert of her own accord.

That alone made Gilbert feel as if he'd been rescued.

"That is what happened…"

At Gilbert's murmur, Dahlia glanced at him.

"So you'd settled on your answer from the beginning."

"Huh?"

"You seem terribly relieved."

"

Still a bit bewildered, Gilbert responded with a wry smile. He felt very apologetic toward Dahlia.

Lying in bed the night before, he'd run through all sorts of ways to turn her down. He'd felt compelled to get rid of Dahlia as soon as possible, treating her as if she were some sort of contaminant.

Gilbert was ashamed of himself. At the same time, he remembered his brother's words: *All women are venemous spiders.*

The thought that he'd been right, that there really were women who weren't, warmed his heart.

Even though it hadn't been very long since he'd met her in person, Gilbert was fully convinced of that.

"Only… Do you think you could spend just a bit longer with me?"

Dahlia sounded apologetic.

"If I go home too readily, Father will scold me…"

"…Ah, I see."

It all made sense to Gilbert now. In aristocratic society, when parents arranged for socialization and marriage, it was usually done with strategic intent. Dahlia probably couldn't just say, "Oh, that's all right," and go home simply because Gilbert wasn't keen on the idea. Besides, it was easy enough to give her what she needed.

"If you're sure I'll do," Gilbert said. Dahlia smiled and nodded.

"Thank you very much. …That really is more like you, Gilbert-sama."

When Gilbert looked perplexed:

"Being casual," Dahlia said, pleasantly.

"It's a bit of a walk, but there's a lovely fountain up ahead, with benches beside it."

Dahlia pointed down the footpath as she spoke, and the two of them set off again.

Apparently this was the first time Dahlia had been to this park, but she'd investigated it beforehand.

If possible, she'd told Gilbert, she'd like to sit and use up a bit more time talking. Her hesitant tone made Gilbert realize that she was being painstakingly considerate of him, and that made him feel even more apologetic.

Still, he thought, *…somehow, I did manage to settle this on my own.*

True, he'd been saved by Dahlia's perceptiveness, but at least he hadn't borrowed help from anyone.

He was a little proud of that.

Walking beside Gilbert, Dahlia spoke, looking up at the trees that lined the footpath.

"I don't often leave the house, you see. This all feels very new to me."

"Yes, you do seem like a bit of a homebody— Uh, I mean… Sorry."

"No, you're right. My father worries that I'll never get myself married

off… Oh no, I'm sorry."

Having both said a bit too much, they both apologized, both smiling uncomfortably.

As they walked, Gilbert mentioned that he was living on his own, and Dahlia's eyes went wide. Apparently the idea of a member of one of the four great dukedoms living alone in a lower-class neighborhood really was startling. As she looked at Gilbert, Dahlia seemed impressed.

"You're really amazing, Gilbert-sama. Living without help from anyone…"

"No, it was just too uncomfortable to stay in that house."

Once the words were out, he realized he might have said a bit too much again. He'd never told anyone he wasn't very close to his true feelings on that subject. He wished it hadn't come up. Telling her the reason would only make the atmosphere more awkward.

Dahlia was watching Gilbert, her mouth closed. Gilbert worried she suspected him of something.

However, Dahlia said, "I see…" Then she smiled gently. "If you live alone, does that mean you cook for yourself, too?"

"Huh? …Oh, yeah. A bit."

"That's wonderful. I've never even set foot in a kitchen."

She must have sensed that he hadn't wanted her to ask. Gilbert was secretly moved by the way Dahlia had changed the subject for him. *What a nice person*, he thought.

Gilbert had completely relaxed. He and Dahlia chatted. Unless he was with someone he was close to, Gilbert tended to be taciturn, but now, unusually for him, he talked about this and that. Since he wasn't able to talk about Pandora activities, they mostly discussed trivial, everyday things.

During the conversation, Oz's name came up.

"Oz…sama?" Dahlia repeated the name.

Oops, Gilbert thought.

As far as the general public was concerned, Oz—Oz Vessalius, of the House of Vessalius—had died ten years ago.

Only a few aristocrats with ties to Pandora knew that Oz had returned from the Abyss.

For that reason, Gilbert had to pretend he'd meant someone else with the same name.

"Yes— He's a…friend," he explained, awkwardly.

Oz was his master. Ordinarily, he'd never dream of calling him a friend, even in jest. He wanted to declare "Oz is my master" to everyone, at all times, with pride and confidence. He wanted to boast about it.

Gilbert's heart was leaden with guilt and remorse.

As Gilbert answered painfully, his eyebrows drawn together, Dahlia looked a bit puzzled, but she responded, "I see. What sort of person is

he?"

At her casual question, Gilbert fell silent. How could he describe Oz to a third party?

I'm proud to call him my master. The words were on the tip of his tongue.

He desperately swallowed them back down, searching for some other, harmless expression.

He thought, and thought, and…

"…He's…hard on the heart, in all sorts of ways."

"*Is* he!"

Then Gilbert told her about how Oz kept him scrambling on a daily basis. He hadn't intended it to sound particularly funny, but at each little anecdote, Dahlia giggled merrily.

He felt as if she was probably laughing at the way Oz had him twisted around his little finger, but somehow it didn't bother him.

Once he'd more or less finished talking, Dahlia said, "You really treasure this Oz-sama, don't you."

Gilbert, who hadn't expected to hear that, responded with a startled "Huh?"

"Hee-hee! I can tell. When you talk about him, it's as plain as day, Gilbert-sama."

Even as he felt a mild jolt at the idea that he was so easy to read, he had no choice but to acknowledge it.

"…Is that right," Gilbert answered, simply.

Talking about himself and Oz had begun to feel awkward, and Gilbert changed the subject.

This time, it was Gilbert's turn to ask Dahlia how she spent her days. However, Dahlia told him she spent all day reading, and that her routine seldom varied. It seemed to Gilbert, though, that this sort of quiet life did not particularly suit her.

After that, they talked of all sorts of things: the books Dahlia liked and things that had happened to Gilbert while he was living on his own.

The air around them was soft and warm.

This isn't a bad way to relax, once in a while, Gilbert thought.

Of course—

He knew there was really no place for him in a world this gentle.

Somehow…just being with this woman is really calming, Gilbert thought.

At length, as they walked down the footpath, Gilbert caught sight of two women up ahead.

The women were crouched down with their backs to him.

By the look of things, they seemed to be in some sort of trouble. This park drew many lower-class visitors, and the flamboyant dresses the ladies wore stood out rather sharply. Dahlia also noticed the pair;

sounding a bit worried, she asked, “Have they fallen, do you think?”

With a nod to Dahlia, Gilbert began to walk a bit faster, approaching the two women from behind.

He called to them, politely: “Can I be of any assistance…?”

—In that instant, for some reason, his heart thudded violently. *What’s going on?* he thought.

“Oh, that’s so *kind* of you,” said one of the women.

“Yes, I’ve broken the heel of my shoe,” said the other.

The pair turned to face him, saying:

“Tee-hee! You really are…too kind. ☆”

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!” Gilbert screamed.

From that yell, you’d have thought he’d encountered the most horrible monster in the world, and Dahlia shrank back, startled.

“Whatever’s the matter?” she called to him, but Gilbert couldn’t answer.

To Dahlia, the individuals standing in front of Gilbert seemed to be a beautiful lady and a lovely young girl. They were so well favored that, if the two of them were to walk around town together, many men would no doubt turn to look at them, stare, and feel compelled to compliment them.

However, Gilbert had screamed as though his soul were evaporating. Dahlia could only tilt her head—“???”—in bewilderment.

One of the pair, the energetic young girl, pouted a bit.

“I *beg* your pardon. You’ll hurt a girl’s feelings, taking one look and screaming like that.”

At her words, the other, an alluring beauty, said, “Myyyy, isn’t *that* the truth!”

Then they looked at each other, and, in perfect harmony, said: “Quite! ☆”

Gilbert knew that, behind him, Dahlia was calling him repeatedly, but he couldn’t answer.

The two women gazed at Gilbert with shining eyes.

“Gilbert-sama? What’s wrong?” Dahlia asked.

“…”

“Gilbert-sama?”

“…”

“Are you friends with these ladies?”

“NO!!”

Gilbert whipped around with incredible force and yelled at Dahlia.

At his ferocity, Dahlia gave a small shriek, and Gilbert apologized involuntarily. “Ah—I’m sorry.”

Gilbert’s response made the two women puff out their cheeks in a dissatisfied way.

The young girl clung to Gilbert’s back, catching the tail of his black

suit jacket and tugging on it.

"How *mean*, Gil-sama! How could you say we're not friends?!"

"—Oooooh, but he isn't *wrong*, now, is he?"

The beauty spoke in a significant tone, circling around to Gilbert's side. She put a hand up to his jaw, tickling him under the chin with a slim finger. Gilbert had completely frozen up. The beauty shot a sidelong glance at Dahlia.

The glance was so seductive that even Dahlia, a woman, felt a chill run through her.

"Our relationship with Gil-sama is a *special* one, you know. We're much more than *friends*."

Gilbert's mouth opened and shut as though he was trying to say something, but no words came out.

He was mouthing, *You guys.*

The beauty and the lovely young girl only looked at him in innocent bewilderment.

As a matter of fact, the well-favored pair was, quite thoroughly:

Oz (lovely young girl)

and

Break (beauty)

—in the flesh.

Oz, in a dress and natural, barely there makeup, put his lips near Gilbert's ear.

He whispered:

"Just leave it to us, Gil. She'll give up after this for sure."

Gilbert seemed petrified. For a moment, Oz looked perplexed. Then he cracked a mischievous little smile and blew in Gilbert's ear.

A violent shudder ran through Gilbert from head to toe, unfreezing him. The moment he could move again, he shook Oz and Break off with a completely discombobulated expression, grabbed Dahlia's wrist a bit roughly, and trotted off down the path, almost running.

"G-Gilbert-sama?!"

Pulled along forcefully by one hand, Dahlia kept glancing behind her.

"A-are you sure it's all right to leave them? Those two women are—"

…Men! Those are men!!

He'd never be able to say it, Gilbert thought, with tears in his eyes.

After they were out of sight…

Oz slumped, heaving an exhausted sigh. Break massaged his own shoulders, working out the stiffness. Both Oz and Break felt as if they'd

given it everything they had.

The Anti-Socialization Plan.

Gilbert had said he'd turn the lady down himself, but Oz and Break had no intention of simply sitting on their hands and watching him.

Gilbert wasn't used to women. Of course things wouldn't go well. They couldn't just leave him to his own devices. They had to help.

Ordinarily, cross-dressing wasn't anywhere on their list of preferred activities, but even so, they'd carried out their strategy, donning dresses they didn't want to wear and appearing in front of Gilbert. As Oz, who'd come up with the idea, had said, *"This is all to mess with Gil… I mean, to* help *Gil. If it's for that, I don't mind if I get hurt."*

And, since they were doing it anyway, they'd decided to go for broke. They'd quelled their sense of reluctance and shame by brute force.

"By the way, Break," Oz said.

Break glanced over at him. "Hmm?"

"Was Gil crying?"

At Oz's words, Break delicately pinched up the frilly skirt of his long dress.

"I'm sure he was moved by our kindness. He can't have imagined we'd go *this* far for him, I'd wager."

"Oh, I see. So that's what it was…" Oz looked down at himself and nodded, his expression satisfied. "He didn't have to run, though. Gil's so bashful. Ah-ha-ha."

"Isn't he *just*. Ha! Ha! Ha!" Break said, laughing airily.

After they'd laughed together for a bit, their faces abruptly went serious, and they exchanged sharp glances.

Then:

"Shall we move on to the next item?"

They grinned.

At last, Gilbert and Dahlia entered the square that held the fountain.

Gilbert was breathing hard. In part, this was because he'd just run a good distance, but most of it was due to his mental upheaval. Beside Gilbert, Dahlia was catching her breath, one hand pressed to her chest.

She didn't seem as if she exercised much as a rule, and the run might have been hard on her.

"I'm sorry," Gilbert apologized. Dahlia shook her head slightly. Her cheeks were flushed. "Let's sit on one of the benches and rest."

At Gilbert's proposal, Dahlia, still out of breath, said, "I…I'm sorry… May I ask…?"

"Hmm?"

"Those…women, back there…"

Gilbert considered pretending he couldn't hear. Dahlia went on.

"Was the smaller one…Oz-sama, perhaps?"

She knows?!

Gilbert twitched.

He was sure he hadn't called Oz's name back there. Dahlia was very perceptive.

Dahlia looked puzzled; she seemed to be thinking hard. She murmured, "…But why would he dress as a woman…?"

Gilbert had no hope of explaining that one.

6

"……What in the world is *that?*" Echo muttered.

She'd been following Gilbert and Dahlia on orders from Vincent, and she'd witnessed Oz and Break's cross-dressing intrusion from beginning to end.

It had been a terrible brouhaha. She'd nearly gotten a headache just watching it. Still, this morning, Vincent had said:

"It's likely that some odd characters will show up today, too…"

She'd been told as much before she left. On top of that:

"Watch the whole thing closely and report it to me, would you? It should be rather amusing."

Echo thought she had no idea what was amusing about this.

As Echo watched, Gilbert ran off, pulling Dahlia by the hand. Oz and Break, who'd stayed behind, put their heads together and began whispering. Echo had absolutely no interest whatsoever in finding out what they were talking about.

Echo must go after Gilbert-sama.

With a small nod, Echo launched herself, beginning to leave the shadow of the tree. Just then…

"Hey, Eko-chan! Here, over here!"

"?!?!"

Suddenly hailed by Oz, in spite of her best efforts Echo came very close to falling. She'd been sure she hadn't been noticed.

Break, sounding thoroughly entertained, chimed in. "We'd like your help. Come on out."

To Echo's ears, his voice seemed like venom so lethal it would kill on contact.

That night.

After Gilbert parted with Dahlia and returned to his apartment, carrying a shopping bag filled with the makings of dinner…

"Man, Gil, that's not safe. You forgot to lock up."

Oz sat up from where he'd been sprawled on the bed, tossing a casual welcome Gilbert's way.

Gilbert's eyes went wide with shock. Then, on reflex, he scolded, "You're the one who's not being safe!"

He'd thought Oz had gone back to Pandora with Break.

…And yet here he was, in the apartment, by himself.

That meant Oz had walked through town on his own to get here. Apparently nothing had happened, but he could conceivably have run into all manner of trouble.

Oz looked as if he had no idea why Gilbert was yelling at him.

Almost immediately, though, he broke into a proud smile.

"Heh-heh! What did you think of today, Gil?"

"…"

Gilbert's only response was a weary silence. His shoulders drooped. Then, looking a bit sullen, he walked into the kitchen and set down the shopping bag.

There were a million things he wanted to say, but stupefaction and a feeling of exhaustion weighed on him even more heavily. Even if he opened his mouth, the only thing likely to come out was a sigh.

Oz and Break's plan had consisted of more than simply surprising Gilbert in drag.

What had followed had had enough force to blow the cross-dressing clean away.

Gilbert and Dahlia had reached the fountain square. Then, right there —

No. He didn't want to remember. Gilbert shook his head, banishing the scene from his memory.

…They're terrible. They're the worst combination ever.

He was gloomily, pessimistically sure of it.

He didn't even have the energy to get mad. In the kitchen, he made tea for himself and Oz, then handed Oz's cup to him.

"Thanks," Oz said, artlessly. He blew on his tea to cool it, then raised the cup to his lips. With a glance at the shopping bag in the kitchen, he said, "What's for dinner?"

"Pasta. …Or that's what I was planning on. What would you like?"

"Pasta's fine. Everything you make is delicious, anyway."

"…All right. Wait just a bit."

Nodding in agreement, Gilbert unpacked the shopping bag.

"Did that Dahlia lady give up for you?"

"…"

At Oz's casual comment, Gilbert fell silent for a moment. Then: "She wasn't interested in the first place."

"…Huh." Oz's eyes widened slightly.

"We'd already settled things before you two showed up in weird clothes."

"You had, huh?" Oz muttered. He seemed disappointed. "We had lots of other stuff planned."

Oz looked up at the ceiling as he spoke.

"So, what, it's over already…?"

"I'm meeting her tomorrow. We promised when we parted ways today."

Gilbert's muttered words brought Oz's eyes down from the ceiling. He looked straight at Gilbert.

Gilbert slightly averted his gaze from Oz.

"Please don't cause trouble tomorrow."

Oz blinked. Then he laughed. "Oh, I see, I *see*." Then, in a very nonchalant tone: "Gil, are you getting married?"

Now why did he make that *leap?!* Gilbert thought, startled. He choked a bit, then realized Oz was teasing.

I knew it, he thought. His mischief-loving master was just having fun with this, using it as a reason to mess with him.

Gilbert scowled a bit.

"…I might. If I did, I'd prefer a lady like her."

At that…

Oz turned his face away from Gilbert and murmured "—Huhn…" in a small voice.

8

"…And that was what happened."

Echo had gone to Vincent's room, late at night, to give him a brief report of the day's events.

"I see," Vincent said from the bed, between yawns.

Echo had told him about what Dahlia had done at the Garland mansion (which Echo had been watching since that morning); about Dahlia's rendezvous with Gilbert; about Oz and Break intruding in drag; and about the rest of Dahlia's day, from the time she'd said good-bye to Gilbert and returned to the mansion until she'd gone to bed. That was all.

Vincent hadn't been particularly interested in Oz and Break's cross-

dressing.

"So Gil's meeting her again, hm…?"

"—Yes. Tomorrow."

"Fine. That aside… Echo."

"Yes, sir."

"Wasn't there something else? Something you should tell me…"

"…No, nothing."

"The Hatter spotted you…trailing him. Didn't he?"

Vincent spoke as if he'd seen it himself. Echo was speechless.

"Make your report, Echo…"

Vincent's voice was sleepy and perfectly casual.

Even so, his words held an absolute compulsion for Echo. There was no way she could deceive him. Echo dropped her gaze to the floor as she mentally reviewed the incident she wanted so badly not to remember (and not only because she'd been seen while tailing someone).

The ghastly happening at the park, which she would have loved to wipe from her past.

"We need your help, Eko-chan."

That was what Oz had said to Echo when she emerged from the shadow of the tree. Naturally, Echo had turned him down without a moment's hesitation. Oz had looked disappointed and said she could at least hear him out before saying no, but she knew it wasn't necessary.

She knew it wouldn't be anything good.

"Echo refuses," she'd repeated.

"You're going to be Gilbert-kun's child!"

Break's tone had been smooth and assertive. Echo thought, *Is this person deranged?*

However, speaking in a perfectly calm voice, as if he were discussing matters of universal common sense, Break said, *"His* illegitimate *child, you know. You are a child Gilbert-kun fathered with a working girl. Today, by sheer chance, you've happened to see Gilbert-kun in the park, about to get his hooks into a new woman, and you are unable to stand by in silence. Oh, I know, I* completely *understand how you must feel."*

It made no sense. Echo was convinced it wasn't "*Is this* person deranged?" but "*This* person *is* deranged."

"Aristocrats hate scandals like that."

Oz chimed in after Break.

"If you show up and call Gil 'Father,' that lady's bound to give up on him. I was planning to do it myself, but then Break said you were here today, too. And in that case…"

Echo couldn't fathom what "in that case" was supposed to mean.

"Gil's a pushover. He's never going to be able to turn her down well on his own. …So."

This was all for Gilbert's sake, Oz—wearing a dress—said

emphatically.

Echo looked at him coldly.

"You are quite clearly enjoying yourself."

"Ha-ha-ha! No, no, not at all…"

Oz denied the accusation with an expression that said, quite clearly, that he *was* enjoying himself.

"That's right," Break agreed.

"Please, Eko-chan. Do it for my valet!"

"Echo refuses. Echo wants no part of this. It's impossible. You're annoying."

"Don't be like that!"

Oz leaned forward so that his lightly made-up face was very close to Echo.

Echo averted her gaze.

"Keep that face away from Echo, please. It smells like powder. Echo refuses."

As she obstinately brushed him aside, Break, who'd somehow managed to get around behind her, clapped his hands onto her shoulders. It didn't feel as if he was exerting much force, but Echo found herself unable to move. *"Let Echo go,"* she said. Break pretended not to hear.

"Do help us out, there's a good girl. You're perfect *for the part.* ♪*"*

Echo wanted nothing to do with that terrible suggestion. She tried to shake him off by force.

But then:

"Is it all right with you if a woman manipulates and wounds Gilbert-kun?" Break whispered in a very low voice, right next to Echo's ear. He added, "This is for Gilbert-kun's sake. Your master *would* want it as well."

Echo flinched. It was an awful threat.

Once Vincent was involved, Echo couldn't say no. She had nowhere to run.

"…Echo will do it."

Echo responded with deep reluctance.

On seeing Echo cave at a mere whisper from Break, Oz looked curious, but Echo said nothing.

She only glared at Oz—the person responsible for this ridiculous idea—with near-lethal force.

Whether or not Oz was aware of the intent behind that sharp glare, he said, *"—Oh, right. I brought some cute little-kid clothes. Wanna wear 'em, Eko-chan?"*

Echo most certainly did not, and said so.

However, in the end…

In the bushes, with just the bow from the outfit on her head, Echo

received a detailed explanation of the plan. Then she went to stand in front of Gilbert, who was sitting on a bench in the fountain square.

She fixed Gilbert with a stare, and said with all her might, “Fa-Father…!”

The shame and humiliation were so great she thought she might die. Behind the bench where Gilbert and Dahlia sat, Oz and Break peeked out from the bushes and flashed thumbs-up at her: “Good job!” Both wore smiles so bright it made Echo want to murder them.

Gilbert seemed dazed and distracted, more than surprised. When Dahlia said, “Father?” and looked from Echo to Gilbert and back, he leaped up from the bench as if he’d been stung and began scanning the area.

Oz and Break had already retreated into the bushes, but Echo could still feel their eyes on her. She thought she could hear Oz saying, “Go, go, Eko-chan!”

Echo stomped down on her feelings, deciding to get this humiliating farce over with as quickly as possible. Then, in a manner that was actually rather grand, she pointed at Dahlia sharply.

In a perfectly flat monotone, she said, “Father, who is this lady? You’re toying with another woman, aren’t you?”

Dahlia only blinked, stunned.

Looking at Gilbert with a perfectly blank face, Echo told him, “Don’t make any more poor little kids like me.”

With an expression as though he’d just suffered memory loss, Gilbert sat down on the bench with a thump. Dahlia looked at Gilbert. She seemed concerned, and she said something to him, but Echo didn’t catch what it was.

At this point, Break had told her, she was supposed to pretend to cry with all her might, but Echo knew there was no way she could manage something like that.

She was at her limit. There was a lot more to the plan she’d been given, but she skipped all of it and went straight to the end. As the final blow, she said:

“Stupid Father.”

She’d been told to scream it on a sob, but she just delivered the line in the same flat monotone. Then she walked away.

There is no way Echo will ever be able to report this, she’d thought.

“…And that…also happened.”

She’d been forced to report all of it.

Echo had never had a hope of deceiving Vincent.

After hearing her out, Vincent laughed: *“Heh-heh-heh.”* It was a thoroughly amused laugh.

He laughed for a good while, then said, “I see. That sounds quite entertaining. Did you enjoy yourself…?”

“…No.”

“To think he’d use *me* to play with *you*. I mustn’t let him get away with that.”

His tone was indifferent, but the words carried a clear tinge of enmity: A negative emotion strong enough to make Echo shiver involuntarily.

“No, I really can’t let him get away with that. Playing with my ‘things’ without my permission… Isn’t that right, Echo? Don’t you agree…?”

Vincent tossed Echo a question she couldn't possibly answer. Echo lowered her gaze to the floor in an attempt at escape and stared, silently. She thought he might press the issue, but Vincent seemed to lose interest in her almost immediately. He looked up at the ceiling and muttered, "I see…"

Then, with a significant smile: "He's meeting her again tomorrow, hmm? —I may just stop by to play, too…"

From his gaze, he seemed to be anticipating something.

9

A big full moon peeked through the window of the apartment.

Gilbert had taken Oz back to Pandora a few hours ago, and now he was alone in his room.

He was sitting up in bed, smoking a cigarette.

As he exhaled smoke, he thought to himself, heavily:

…That was a day and a half.

The attack of the cross-dressers. The sudden "Father" assault.

He was used to Oz and Break's terrible pranks, yet he felt completely wrung out. What had Dahlia thought during her day with him? …*Still*, Gilbert thought. He remembered how she'd been during the "illegitimate child" fiasco, and after Echo had left.

For a little while, Dahlia had seemed speechless, but at last she'd smiled.

"You're surrounded by all sorts of entertaining people, Gilbert-sama."

The words could have been taken as biting sarcasm, but he was confident that Dahlia's had been honest and straightforward.

When they parted at nightfall, Dahlia spoke to Gilbert.

"I really…enjoyed this whole day, Gilbert-sama."

"No, I'm sorry about all the… I'm sorry."

"No, I mean it. I really did have fun. It's nice to leave the house and spend time with other people, isn't it?"

"…Thank you for saying that."

Although he didn't put the rest into words, Gilbert felt as if she'd rescued him.

After a day like that, he'd fully expected to hear complaints or grievances.

He'd offered to escort her home, but Dahlia had refused. *"Only…"* She looked at Gilbert; she seemed to be on the verge of saying something.

"If you don't mind, could we meet again?"

"Huh?"

"Just as friends, I mean."

He hadn't been expecting that. However, he thought, he'd done nothing but cause her trouble the entire day, and thanks to Oz and Break, she'd gotten pulled into all sorts of weird situations. …And had he thanked her and apologized to her enough? He felt he hadn't even begun.

He had to thank her properly, he thought.

Above all else…

There was a part of him that was rather pleased with the idea of seeing Dahlia again. Even as he noted that particular aspect of himself with surprise, Gilbert answered, *"Sure."*

"Oh, I'm so glad. I was sure you'd turn me down."

As she spoke, Dahlia put a hand to her chest in relief.

They'd decided to meet the next day, at the same place and time as today.

Tomorrow, he'd have to make sure Oz and Break didn't interfere.

"Come to think of it…"

Gilbert glanced out the window. He thought about what Oz had been like, when they'd parted after he took him back to Pandora.

"Oz seemed…a bit different somehow."

10

A big full moon shone through the bedroom window.

It was three in the morning.

As Dahlia lay in bed, her eyes blinked open, and she sat up in one smooth motion. She opened the curtains and looked out. Outside the window, moonlight streamed down over the elms. She watched them for a little while, fixedly, as though confirming some shape; then she pushed back the covers, lowering her feet to the floor.

Slipping a cardigan on over her nightclothes, she crossed to the door that opened onto the hall.

Just as her hand touched the knob, there was a knock at the door.

At the same time, from the hallway, a rasping voice spoke: "—Black Widow."

At the voice, Dahlia flinched, and a shiver ran down her spine. "… Yes," she answered, hoarsely.

"What are you doing? The gathering is well under way."

"I'm sorry, I…"

Dahlia glanced back at the window.

"No excuses. You may be sure a fitting punishment awaits you."

"…I understand."

"Hurry. The Great Mother is expecting you."

At those words, Dahlia opened the door.

…But no one was there: Only darkness lurked in the hall. It was as if it had always been that way. Not even the ghost of a presence remained. For a little while, Dahlia gazed into the darkness, accustoming her eyes to it. At last she sighed.

"Gilbert-sama," she murmured. "I'm sure you'll…"

Letting her words trail off in midsentence, Dahlia disappeared down the hall.

11

The next day.

"The same place and time as yesterday… How very stodgy of you, Gilbert-kun."

Break spoke from the shadows of the bushes in the park.

It was a little before noon. Gilbert stood waiting, alone, at the spot he and Dahlia had decided on yesterday. Oz was sitting on the grass beside Break. The two of them had followed Gilbert to the park again.

"Uh-huh," Oz responded, listlessly. He was sitting with his back to Gilbert, as if he didn't want to see.

"—?"

Break glanced at Oz.

"What's *wrong*, Oz-kun?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing."

Oz ducked the question. Break said "Hmm…" He seemed to be pondering something. Oz stared blankly up at the sky. It was a beautifully clear day, and there wasn't a cloud in sight. Even so, as Oz looked at it, his expression seemed vaguely glum.

"Oz-kun. Mistress Dahlia seems to be late. Gilbert-kun is fidgeting."

"Huh."

"You don't seem very interested in this today."

"—That's not it…"

At Break's words, Oz changed positions, glancing in Gilbert's direction.

Beyond the gap in the bushes, far away, Gilbert stood, obviously waiting for someone.

He seemed a bit restless; he was glancing down at his pocket watch, concerned about the time, and searching for Dahlia, and looking into the distance.

Letting his gaze rest absently on Gilbert, Oz muttered, "So. Gil."

"???" Break cocked his head, perplexed by Oz's murmur.

"What sort of woman do you think he likes?"

Oz's words had been quite casual. "Hmm," Break said. "Well, I expect he's not comfortable with 'strong women.' Our Gilbert-kun is *quite* the pushover, you know."

"He sure is."

"He's not much good with talkative women either, or women who wear flashy clothes. …I'd assume he'd be interested in the opposite sort."

"—But the Dahlia lady was exactly like that."

Oz thought back.

Yesterday, he'd come into close contact with Dahlia. The woman had seemed slender, fragile, and modest. When he'd seen her and Gilbert standing next to each other, he'd even thought, *They look good together.*

"Let's meet again tomorrow," they'd promised when they parted.

Gilbert had said the socialization issue had been shelved. He'd said Dahlia hadn't been interested in the first place, either.

It was probably the usual story: Dahlia's parents had pushed the deal through on their own. …Yet even so, they were meeting again.

What did they mean by it?

A completely physical relationship with no illusions on either part… No. No way. Couldn't happen.

Not even if the world turned inside out.

Oz was well aware that Gilbert wasn't the kind of person who could do something like that. If Gilbert *did* somehow manage it, Oz thought he'd actually be impressed, in a way.

If it wasn't that, then what was it?

Of course, although they were master and valet, Gilbert could do anything he wanted in his private life.

It's nothing I should be criticizing, but —

As Oz thought, next to him, Break gave a small snort of laughter.

Oz sent a hard, sidelong glance at him.

"What…?"

"*Noooooo*, no, absolutely nothing at *all*."

Break had a shameless smile on his face.

"That's really annoying."

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…"

"Uwah, this old guy is seriously creeeepyyyy…"

Oz lobbed an insult at the smirking Break, but he was aware that he was fumbling a bit.

Those requests for permission to socialize with Gilbert.

Those were something Gilbert had experienced during that ten-year blank, the years Oz knew nothing about.

His valet-baiting hobby wasn't the only reason Oz had gotten involved in this anti-socialization strategy. There'd been a kind of delight in it, as though he was getting to interact with the Gilbert from those missing ten years.

But. Still.

"Gil, are you getting married?"

He'd only meant to tease him a little.

"…I might. If I did, I'd prefer a lady like her."

Gilbert's expression had been sullen when he said that. Oz thought he'd probably just been rising to the bait, accepting the fight Oz had picked with him. In that case, he should have just been able to wolf-whistle and make fun of him. Instead, for a moment, he'd found himself speechless.

Ever since then, his heart had been full of something murky and uncomfortable.

Oz's gaze dropped to the grass at his feet.

Just then:

Tunk.

As Oz sat lost in thought, Break tapped him lightly on the forehead with a loose fist.

On reflex, Oz looked at Break; he was clearly annoyed. There hadn't been any pain, but he rubbed his forehead anyway.

"I *told* you, Break, don't tease me."

When Break spoke, although his voice was still teasing, there was something thoughtful in it.

"You're an intelligent boy. Buuut…"

"__"

"…I see you're still clumsy when it comes to yourself."

Break spoke as if he'd seen through everything, and Oz tried to come up with some kind of retort. However, before he could:

"Well, now. What do you suppose Gilbert-kun is up to?"

As if drawn by Break's words, Oz looked in that direction.

Gilbert had just given up on waiting for Dahlia and begun walking. He seemed to be headed out of the park.

"Planning to go to the Garland residence, I'd wager," Break said, and Oz nodded.

Dahlia still hadn't appeared, and he probably intended to ask after her at her house.

As he gazed at Gilbert's profile, Oz muttered, "…Gil looks really upset."

…Has something happened to Dahlia?

As he headed for the park gate, Gilbert thought. It was easy to imagine that something might have happened. Dahlia's father, the head of the Garland family, had engineered this request to socialize; Gilbert had turned it down, and Dahlia had accepted his refusal. Dahlia hadn't been interested in the idea in the first place, which had saved Gilbert and ended the matter. Yesterday, they'd killed plenty of time together

before they parted, just in case, but…

There was no guarantee that Dansen, the head of the Garland family, had accepted the situation quietly.

When Dahlia had returned home, she might have been forced to shoulder the blame somehow.

Dahlia had been charged with the duty of joining her family to one of the four great dukedoms. However, she had not done so, and on top of that, she'd planned to meet a member of the Nightray family again as a "friend." On learning of this, Dansen might have forbidden his daughter from going out.

If that was the case, what should Gilbert do?

It's my fault, not hers! I've got to tell him that…

He couldn't see her socially, let alone marry her. There was no changing that, no matter how nice Dahlia was. He didn't know how much good it would do for him to go to the Garland residence when he'd already reached that conclusion.

…Even so. This time, he had to tell them clearly, by himself, without flinching.

I—

Yesterday, Dahlia had saved him right and left, and he hadn't done anything manly in front of her. That made him even more determined to succeed this time. Gilbert strode along, backed by an enthusiastic aura that seemed out of place on him.

I'm…going!

Behind him, Oz and Break had begun to tail him, but Gilbert completely failed to notice.

12

On the outskirts of Reveil, Gilbert hurried down a lane that wound through an elm forest.

…There was no wind. The forest was silent.

Finally, Gilbert's field of vision opened up, and as he left the forest, the Garland mansion came into view. For the main residence of an aristocratic family, the building wasn't very large. However, although old, its appearance exuded solidity and respectability, as if it were a clear physical expression of the Garland family's long history and honorable traditions.

Possibly because the elm forest made them unnecessary, no wall circled the mansion, and there was no gate. He examined the building from a distance, but all the curtains in all the rooms were closed, and from the outside he couldn't tell which room was Dahlia's. Wordlessly,

Gilbert walked up to the front door.

Standing before the door, he took a deep breath, then tugged on the bellpull that hung beside it.

There was no immediate response; Gilbert was forced to wait for a while.

Just when he was beginning to wonder if he should try calling inside, the door opened with a long, low *creeeeak*.

"—May I inquire who is calling?"

A rasping voice challenged him from somewhere quite low down. It belonged to an elderly man in a threadbare black suit.

The man was small to begin with, and on top of that, his back was terribly hunched, so his head was low. The upturned gaze he directed at Gilbert clung to him clammily; it seemed more appraising than suspicious.

Although he felt rather repulsed, Gilbert spoke resolutely. "I am Gilbert Nightray of the House of Nightray. Is Miss Dahlia Garland at home?"

"…Hmm. What business might you have with the young mistress, sir?"

Gilbert had introduced himself as a member of one of the four great dukedoms, and yet the Garland family's butler didn't seem overawed in the least. On the contrary: With an air of superficially polite insolence, he had answered Gilbert's question with one of his own.

Gilbert made no attempt to sugarcoat the matter. "We'd promised to meet today, but she never arrived."

He'd come to see if she was all right, he said.

At that, in a gesture that seemed vaguely theatrical, the butler bowed his already low head even lower.

"My humblest apologies. I see. So that is what occurred."

"Is she feeling ill?"

The butler answered Gilbert's question with a slight, high-pitched chuckle.

"Lady Dahlia began feeling poorly late last night. She has taken to her bed. She has always been rather frail, and this sort of thing is not unusual… I regret that we were unable to contact you."

Instinctively, Gilbert felt that this might be a lie. However, he didn't have anything substantial enough to make the other man change his tune.

Gilbert asked for permission to pay her a short get-well visit, but the butler turned him down firmly, although his tone was still polite.

"…In that case…" Finding himself stalemated already, Gilbert pressed on. "Could I pay my respects to the head of the household?"

"Dansen-sama will see no one. He is not fond of people, you understand. If you really must see him, you will have to put in a request in advance. …We cannot, of course, accommodate those who are ill-

mannered enough to demand that the master present himself because they are unable to see the young mistress."

"Nrgh. Well, I…"

Gilbert was at a loss as to how to respond. Of course, the butler had the more logical argument.

Should he turn back for now, or force his way through?

Gilbert was torn.

Just then, there was a clatter somewhere overhead, from an upper story, and immediately afterward—

He heard a faint noise. No, a voice.

A voice so thin and weak it could easily have been mistaken for the wind.

Gilbert started.

Someone had called his name in a pleading tone, as if asking for help… Or so he felt.

That's Dahlia's voice.

Possibly the butler hadn't heard it. He seemed perplexed by Gilbert's abruptly sharp expression.

In a corner of his mind, Gilbert thought, *This is going to create a big hassle later. …Still. Either way, I—*

At this late date, it wouldn't bother him one bit to be treated like any more of a black sheep by aristocratic society, or by the House of Nightray itself.

Gilbert's lips curved into a faint, fearless smile.

"Sorry. I'm coming in."

With that brief statement, he stepped into the mansion, pushing the butler aside. Beyond the door was a modest entry hall, and a large staircase that led to the second floor was directly in front of him. The butler put out a hand to catch his arm, saying, "Please, sir, you mustn't," but Gilbert shook him off and made for the staircase.

In a normal aristocratic household, behavior like this would likely have brought the guards down on him. However, the mansion was so quiet that there might have been no other people in it. Once he'd freed himself from the butler, no one barred Gilbert's way.

He climbed the stairs, calling "Dahlia" as he went.

Once he reached the second floor, at the top of the stairs, he knew right away:

Through the door of one of the rooms, he could hear a weeping voice.

It was Dahlia's voice, calling his name.

Quickly, he went to the door. The possibility that it might be locked crossed his mind, but when he twisted the knob, it opened easily. Dahlia stood beyond the door, dressed in a thin negligee. When she saw Gilbert, her eyes went wide and she fell silent.

Her eyes were red and bloodshot.

Gilbert didn't know what to say to her, and for a short while, he was

silent, too.

"You…came," Dahlia said.

She seemed to have mixed feelings about that. Her tone wasn't one of simple delight.

Gilbert glanced at the door.

"Your father?" he asked, briefly.

Dahlia nodded, uncomfortably. Gilbert continued. "Please let me speak to him. This wasn't your fault."

"Won't you come in?"

Dahlia took a step back, inviting Gilbert into her room. Possibly she had something to discuss with Gilbert before taking him to see her father.

Large bookshelves took up most of the wall space in Dahlia's room. She had said she loved books, and her room reflected this. She'd mentioned that she liked mystery novels, but all the books wore covers, and the titles weren't visible.

As Gilbert gazed at the bookshelves, he noticed a faint fragrance.

This room smells nice…

A sweet aroma hung in the air, as though Dahlia were wearing perfume, or burning incense.

"I'll make tea."

At a small table in the center of the room, Dahlia tilted a pot and began to pour tea.

"Oh, sure. Thank you."

"Do you take milk?"

"That's fine."

"I can add a drop of brandy if you'd like."

"No, I don't really—"

Was it his imagination? Dahlia, who'd been crying just a moment ago, now sounded as if she were in high spirits.

That's strange, Gilbert thought.

However, as if erased by the sweet scent, the doubt faded in his mind. Dahlia approached, cup in hand, and held it out to him. "Here you are."

Gilbert took it obligingly—or tried to take it. For some reason, his fingers were unsteady, and he very nearly dropped it. "I'm sorry," he apologized.

"It's all right," Dahlia said shyly. "Go on."

As Dahlia urged him to drink, Gilbert had a vague sense that something was wrong, but he didn't know what.

He took a small sip.

Dahlia was watching him, steadily.

……? Something's…funny—

Before he knew it, all the strength had gone out of his legs. He staggered, falling to his knees on the carpet. His senses were hazy, as though he were dreaming. The cup fell to the floor, and he fell after it,

but there was no pain. Strident alarm bells were ringing in his head.

However, his body wouldn't listen to him, and even his mind was fading, disappearing beyond the mist.

"For the Great Mother—"

Dahlia's murmur was the last thing Gilbert heard before he lost consciousness.

A short while later.

A carriage departed from the rear of the Garland mansion, bound for the center of Reveil.

The coachman was the small, elderly butler.

Inside the black carriage, Dahlia sat in one of the two facing seats.

A prone form wrapped in a white sheet lay on the other.

13

"Sooo…What next?"

Break spoke from the shadow of a tree trunk in the elm forest that surrounded the Garland mansion. Oz, who'd watched the carriage drive away down the lane from the shadow of the next trunk over, looked back at Break. His eyes seemed to ask, *What's going on?*

"Sorry. I'm coming in."

Oz had seen Gilbert push the butler aside and force his way into the mansion after he'd been denied a meeting with Dahlia.

The sight had made him wonder if Gilbert was serious. If this was how things were, there was no place for the Anti-Socialization Plan. Break had said, "My, *my*, Gilbert-kun, how manly of you…" and seemed to be enjoying himself, but Oz couldn't share his enthusiasm.

Now a carriage had left the mansion.

From what I saw, it didn't look like Gil was inside, but…

He'd only caught a brief glimpse through the carriage's small window; he might have missed seeing him. He'd seen only Dahlia in the carriage.

Had Dahlia left Gilbert in the mansion and gone out alone? …That would have been unnatural.

"Dahlia Garland, aged nineteen, only daughter of Dansen Garland, the head of the Garland family."

As he spoke, his voice matter-of-fact, Break stepped from the shadow of his tree trunk onto the lane that ran through the forest.

Oz followed Break out onto the lane. He gazed down it, as though he were watching the carriage that was already out of sight.

"Night Butterfly," Break murmured.

"Night…Butterfly? What's that?" Oz echoed Break's words, puzzled.

"The name of a boutique just off the high street. It doesn't carry famous brands, but it does have a wide array of dresses designed to appeal to fancy madams. From what I hear, business is fairly good. I've seen a few at parties, and they're quiiiiiite…"

"'Quite' what?"

"Gaping décolletage, you know. Like this. They're dresses created to tempt men."

As Break explained, with gestures, Oz's face went rather red.

"They're also designed to be quite easy to take off."

Oz choked a little.

The topic was a bit too much for someone who hadn't yet climbed the stairway to adulthood.

"S-so what?! Why bring that up now?!"

"Dahlia's never been one for going out. For the past six months, however, she's been spotted entering and leaving Night Butterfly frequently… And it isn't as though she's started attending parties."

As the conversation unexpectedly connected with the subject at hand, Oz had no idea what to say. However, at Break's next words, his expression suddenly changed.

"Besides. There are dark rumors about the proprietress of Night Butterfly."

"…Such as?"

"That the proprietress is running a secret club under the boutique. That, although they call it a club, they actually conduct antisocial devil worship— And that, in *that* case, it resembles a black magic cabal, or something along those lines. Of course…"

Break paused for a moment.

"Dahlia may be involved. …Perhaps."

Oz felt seriously uneasy. At the same time, he had a few questions.

"Break, why…? When did you check into that?"

Break's answer was casual. "Gilbert-kun *did* come to me for advice about it, you know. I've always done at least *that* much for him."

He'd had fun messing with Gilbert, but behind the scenes, he'd run proper investigations on the other parties. That did sound like Break, but Oz wasn't quite satisfied.

"In that case, you could have told me about it, too."

"But you didn't *ask* me. —Not about Dahlia's past. ♪"

At Break's unabashed answer, Oz's shoulders slumped. It was entirely possible that, while Break had had fun toying with Gilbert, he'd been entertaining himself by watching Oz as well. Oz glared at Break. He considered making a sarcastic comment, but decided against it.

If what Break said was true…

"Wait, then, Dahlia might be…"

"Exactly. You can't judge by appearances. …It's possible there was

some intent behind her approach to Gilbert-kun."

By "intent," he didn't mean "socialization with an eye to marriage"…

When his thoughts had taken him that far, Oz realized that something felt off. What had Gilbert told him the night before?

He'd said the request to socialize wasn't something Dahlia herself had wanted. Her father, the head of the Garland family, had planned it.

When he mentioned this to Break, Break responded with a short, "Oh, that." Then he said, "Master Dansen is no longer with us. He passed away about six months ago."

14

The faint hiss of burning candlewicks.

Gilbert awoke, surfacing into a dull headache.

He seemed to have been blindfolded with some sort of cloth: His field of vision was pitch-black. He could tell that he was seated in a chair. His arms and legs had been lashed to the chair's arms and legs, and he couldn't move them at all. —He'd been tied up.

He'd had tea in Dahlia's room, and then he'd collapsed.

That was as far as Gilbert's memories went.

Where…am I?

He'd awakened to find himself a prisoner.

Ordinarily, it wouldn't have been odd for someone in his situation to feel confused or frantic, but Gilbert was calm.

He might have had a headache, but his thoughts were sharp and clear.

He didn't immediately raise his voice. Instead, he used his free senses to explore his surroundings. In the air, he caught the lingering scent of blood. When he listened carefully, he heard faint breathing, as though several people were watching and waiting. They had Gilbert surrounded. Was Dahlia among them? He couldn't tell that much. …But.

…*She set me up?*

Why? He didn't know.

He was fairly sure that Dahlia had mixed a sleeping potion into his tea.

On top of that, the sweet fragrance that had hung in Dahlia's room had probably been a type of incense, compounded to dull the senses. Something to keep him from noticing the drug in his tea… In that case, her methods had been meticulous and sophisticated. It meant she'd counted on Gilbert coming to the mansion from the very beginning.

At length, he heard one sharp footstep, and someone addressed him. "Are you awake, chosen 'sacrifice'?"

The voice was a woman's…but not Dahlia's. It wasn't a voice he recognized.

Although it was superficially cool, a dark fanaticism lurked deep within it.

In an indifferent tone, without flinching in the slightest, Gilbert asked a question of his own:

"So you're the ringleader?"

"I'll thank you to refrain from using that boorish term. —Call me the 'Great Mother.'"

"That's quite a name." Gilbert sounded mildly disgusted.

"Heh-heh! You're a steady one. I suppose I'd expect no less from a son of Nightray."

Gilbert was a bit startled.

Did the woman know what it meant to do harm to one of the four families, to whom the crown had granted vast authority? On top of that, even among the four, the House of Nightray's position was unique. Did she know how serious a matter it was to lay hands on a Nightray?

From the woman's words, he could tell that she did know, and had done so anyway.

Clack, clack. The woman's footsteps approached Gilbert.

"That is precisely what makes you a worthy offering for our god."

As she spoke, the woman's hands twined around the back of Gilbert's head, and the blindfold fell away.

Gilbert found himself looking at a woman's enraptured face. She seemed to be somewhere between thirty and forty.

Although her features were regular, they gave the impression of being somehow warped. The fault lay in her eyes. They were the eyes of one in the thrall of a mad obsession. Her showy, provocative dress clashed oddly with the old book she carried carefully under her arm.

The woman leaned in close to Gilbert, as if she meant to kiss him.

However, Gilbert ignored her and glanced quickly around the room. It was a stone chamber, and not very large. From the absence of windows, he guessed it was underground. Seven or eight women stood solemnly along the walls.

Among them, he found Dahlia.

"Dahlia."

When he called her name, briefly, she gave a small gasp and averted her face. Gilbert returned his gaze to the woman in front of him.

"Was Dahlia acting on your orders?"

"She was. She's known as 'Black Widow' here." The woman smiled.

Black Widow. A type of venemous spider.

It was a byname, Gilbert thought. Like his "Raven."

His brother Vincent's words flitted through his mind. *All women are venemous spiders.*

He put off thinking about that until later, focused on the woman in

front of him, and continued. “From the very beginning, you mean?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Her smile widened, and the woman began to speak proudly. She told Gilbert she’d researched him, studying him thoroughly to discover what sort of woman would be able to create a vulnerability in his heart.

She’s not wrong. Gilbert suppressed a bitter smile. If she’d needed a woman to ensnare Gilbert, Dahlia had been the perfect choice.

I sure am calm, aren’t I…? Gilbert thought, laughing at himself a little. *I guess I really do belong to “this side” of the world—*

More than he did to the bright world of marriage and socialization, of proper relationships.

Here he was, able to maintain an incredible calm.

It was equally true that, somewhere deep down, a part of him regretted having that ability. …But.

“And yet, this foolish child!”

Interrupting Gilbert’s thoughts, the woman spoke loudly, her tone acidic. She approached Dahlia.

As Dahlia flinched, shrinking back, the woman slapped her across the face with all her might. The dull sound echoed through the stone chamber. The blow had been powerful enough to send the delicate Dahlia reeling, but she only apologized in a faint voice: “I’m very sorry.”

As the woman pressed a hand over Dahlia’s neck, making her wince in agony, she glanced at Gilbert.

“When it came to snaring you, she hesitated. Such a nuisance.”

Gilbert’s eyes widened slightly.

“This after I told her I’d resurrect her precious father through the power of our god.”

“Her father?”

At Gilbert’s murmur, the woman began to speak, her face suffused with a sense of superiority.

“Ah! I see you didn’t know. The girl’s father passed away six months ago. He’s long gone. Well, of course you wouldn’t have known: She hasn’t told anyone about it. An only child and her only parent… The affection that bound them to one another must have been incredibly deep.”

The woman—the Great Mother—had been constantly searching for devotees to serve her god, and one of the believers had noticed that Dahlia seemed strange. She’d approached her, and Dahlia had come to the Great Mother in search of a miracle, becoming a believer.

“A miracle?”

At Gilbert’s muttered words, the Great Mother laughed. “That’s right, that’s what she wanted! —Oh, shall I tell you? In one of the rooms of that mansion you visited lies—”

“Don’t! Please!” Dahlia screamed, as though the woman had found an emotional wound she didn’t want touched.

"—Lies her father's corpse, even now! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

With an expression as if she was fighting back pain, Dahlia desperately averted her face from Gilbert.

"Is that true, Dahlia?"

Dahlia didn't answer Gilbert's question.

Her silence spoke volumes.

It *was* the truth.

"And she wants it brought back to life. What a warped, foolish wish!" The Great Mother went on, sounding thoroughly amused. "But our god is merciful. The wishes of greedy fools! The prayers of guilty sinners! No doubt he will accept them both equally!"

"—Stop."

Gilbert's voice was low. He hadn't spoken roughly, but his voice stopped the Great Mother's words cold.

After hearing the words "our god," "sacrifice," and "offering," he didn't even have to ask what the women were. They were fanatics who worshipped an evil god, rather than the globally prevalent angel religion.

Not that Gilbert had the slightest shred of belief in either one.

What really existed in this world were "demons." Grotesque beings who took advantage of the darkness, desires, and weakness in human hearts, made contracts with them, and destroyed them. They were called Chains.

These women should have been thanking their god for the fact that they'd come this far without attracting a Chain.

"I'm saying this for your own good. Let me go. …And quit doing this ridiculous stuff immediately."

Gilbert really had said it for the women's sake.

"You're certainly calm."

The Great Mother sounded amused, but there was an edge of irritation to her voice.

In a situation this tame—

If it came down to it, he could easily turn the tables by summoning the Chain he was contracted to. Of course, even without going that far, he could tell at a glance that the women were amateurs when it came to fights. There was nothing here to make Gilbert anxious or uneasy.

"Could it be that you don't understand?" The Great Mother sounded mildly appalled. She released Dahlia, returning to stand in front of Gilbert. "If so, you're rather dull-witted."

As she spoke, she took the book from under her arm and held it lovingly to her breast. Then, in a soft, coaxing voice: "Fu-fu-fu. You are a true sacrifice, chosen through the words of the scriptures."

"I'll admit to being slow on the uptake, but I had picked up on that part," Gilbert replied crossly.

"Your soul will be held fast in the arms of our god, never to return. —

Your flesh and blood will serve to nourish him."

The Great Mother seemed intoxicated by her own words. She was actually trembling. Gilbert stared at her coldly, seeing a woman who'd drowned in the darkness of her heart. Then, without looking at Dahlia, he spoke to her.

"Dahlia, what about you?"

At Gilbert's question, Dahlia only looked down. "…I'm sorry," she murmured.

So that's it, Gilbert thought. He heaved a small sigh, although his neck was still restrained.

The Great Mother didn't even think it suspicious that Gilbert, her captive, was perfectly composed. She continued, enraptured. "Now then, let's slit your throat. Hollow out your chest. Offer your life to our god."

She took a knife from her bosom and held it to Gilbert's neck. The blade broke the skin; beads of blood welled up. For a moment, Dahlia started to say something, but the words wouldn't come. The Great Mother whispered to Gilbert, gently, madly, "Go on. Tremble. Fear. That is what—"

"Shut up."

Gilbert slipped one of his hands free of its bonds, pulled a handgun from his inside pocket, and held it to the Great Mother's forehead, right between her eyes.

Possibly because they'd assumed Dahlia's incense and potion would keep Gilbert from moving easily for a while, they'd bound him carelessly, and they hadn't even taken his gun. It was as if the thought that their sacrifice might strike back had never crossed their minds.

He'd been roundly underestimated.

It's a complete farce.

His thoughts were cool.

He didn't even feel like wasting lead on opponents like these.

Gilbert said, simply but sharply:
"Unfortunately, my flesh and blood belong to Oz."

Just as he spoke, the door to the stone chamber flew open with a bang.
Then a voice he knew very well said:
"—Gil!"

15

A short while ago. Back when Gilbert was still tied to the chair, asleep.

"…Uwah, they really *are* flashy. Hey, this one's see-through."
Just off Reveil's high street, Oz—muttering—peered into the show window of the high-class boutique Night Butterfly. Behind him, Break responded: "What did I tell you?" At his feet lay the Garland family's butler. He'd been put out of commission with one karate chop from Break.
When Oz and Break reached the boutique, the butler had been standing by the door, obviously waiting for someone. As Oz approached the door, the butler had drawn a handgun from an inner pocket— Or rather, he had been attempting to do so when Break struck. He'd gone down quite easily.
"Are we going in through there, Break?"
Oz pointed to the door beside the show window.
Break said, "Let's see…" He looked thoughtful. "There does seem to be a back door, but that sounds like work. Why not just go in through the front?"
Oz nodded, then looked up at the boutique's sign that hung over his head.
After the carriage had left the Garland residence, Oz and Break had sneaked into the deserted mansion and looked for Gilbert. However, they hadn't found him anywhere. That meant the natural thing was to assume he'd been bundled into that carriage.
Having determined the most likely destination was Night Butterfly, they'd visited the shop.
"Still…" Oz murmured. He sounded impressed. "I never thought they'd have their hideout here, right in the middle of town."
"The best place to hide a tree is in a forest. If you want to hide a person, use a crowd."
Break sounded as if it wasn't unusual at all.

By making the place appear to be a high-class boutique on the surface, it would naturally attract noble ladies.

If the proprietress was the leader of an evil organization and was hoping to increase her power, she'd been wise to target the women of the aristocracy. If she managed to involve them, she'd have vast amounts of money at her disposal, and they'd only improve her camouflage in public spheres.

Oz stood in front of the door and quietly grasped the knob. He tried to turn it, but of course it was locked.

When he looked back, Break had a small key pinched between his fingers and was waggling it at him.

Break glanced at the butler, who was collapsed at his feet, and smiled. "Borrowed it. ☆"

Oz took the key and slipped it into the door's keyhole. He turned it. *Click*. He pulled the knob, and the door opened.

No sound came from inside. The shop seemed deserted.

Without turning, Oz spoke to Break. "Okay, Break. Let's go."

"—Onii-chan?"

As if replying for Break, a voice cut in from the side. *Huh?* Oz thought.

It was a voice he should never have heard in a place like this.

Oz's gaze darted toward its source. …It was his little sister, Ada. Not only that, but she didn't even have her maid with her. She was all alone, here in this back lane. Startled and worried, Oz forgot his own position and involuntarily raised his voice.

"Ada, what do you think you're doing in a place like this, all by yourself?! That's dangerous!"

Ada's shoulders quivered under the angry scolding.

At the same time, Oz came back to himself with a jolt. He'd remembered exactly what he was in the middle of doing. He shot a flustered look in Break's direction, but the prone form of the butler at his feet had vanished. With a conjuror's dexterity, Break had apparently flung the man into the shadows somewhere.

As was only to be expected, Break's expression was slightly troubled, but his eyes said, *This one's all yours, Oz-kun.*

As unhappy as Oz was to have the situation dropped in his lap, it was true that, as Ada's big brother, he was the one who should handle it.

He turned to face Ada again. The sight of her big brother's anger had clearly made her nervous.

"Oh, uh, I'm sorry, Ada. I didn't mean to yell like that."

When Oz apologized, Ada shook her head. *There must be a reason Ada's in a place like this, all by herself*, Oz thought.

Then his gaze abruptly went to the boutique, and the shock hit him like a ton of bricks. He looked back at her.

"Ada, don't tell me… Are you planning to buy something from this

place?"

To the point where she'd go on the sly, taking the risk of walking around on her own—

His little sister had certainly grown a lot, but still, it was much, much too early for this. As her big brother, Oz couldn't accept it.

Your Onii-chan won't stand for it! That was how he felt.

At Oz's words, Ada glanced at the show window, took in the display of provocative dresses, and blushed bright red.

Hastily, she looked back at Oz, saying, "N-no. No!" and waving her hands wildly. She told him that she'd come to town with her maid to do some shopping and had seen her big brother leaving the high street for a back alley. Without thinking, she'd left her maid behind and run after him.

"Oh, was *that* all," Oz said, sighing with relief.

This time, it was Ada's turn to ask. With several little nervous glances at the show window, she said, "…What about you, Onii-chan? Were you buying a dress to give to someone…?"

Oz burst out laughing.

"N-n-no! And anyway, I like younger, more innocent-looking dresses —"

"But you were on your way in…weren't you?"

Oz didn't know what to say.

His real intentions were different…but he couldn't tell his sister that.

He glanced at Break, who was silently mouthing, *We don't have time to stand around chatting!* at him. *I* know *that!* Oz retorted with his eyes.

He had to get Ada away from here somehow. He didn't want to drag her into this.

However, she was already suspicious—either that, or immensely curious.

If he didn't talk her around very cleverly, she might follow them inside—

"Well, uh, you see. Someone asked me to come here, to…to pick something up. That's all."

"Who?"

Oz found himself at a loss again. He thought hard and fast. Finally,

I'm sorry!

With a silent apology, he said, "For Uncle. Uncle Oscar." He gave a strained little smile.

"Uncle Oscar…?"

"That's right. He's sending it to someone… A lady. But it sounds as if he doesn't want word to get around, so… Could you pretend you didn't see me? Pretend you didn't see anything, Ada, and get away from the boutique. I bet your maid's looking for you anyway. All right?"

At last, after hearing Oz through, Ada nodded timidly. Her cheeks were red. What was going through her mind? With another glance at the

show window, Ada murmured, “To think Uncle Oscar had someone to give dresses like these to…”

If Uncle Oscar finds out about this, he may actually kill me, Oz thought. However, for now, all that mattered was getting himself through this situation.

“Oh, um, ummm, then, I’ll be…going.”

“R-right. Sorry, Ada.”

As Ada left, awkwardly, Oz gave her an equally awkward wave. As Oz watched her go, Break came up beside him.

“Well done,” he said, but Oz couldn’t bring himself to be completely happy about that. Once again, Break put his hand on the knob, opened the door, and slipped into the boutique.

Oz hastily followed him.

The shop was hung with gaudy dresses on display, but the lights were off, and the place was filled with a dreary gloom. As the two of them entered, their footsteps were the only sound.

“There’s no one here.”

At Oz’s murmur, Break nodded.

“They couldn’t know who might come in. If they kidnapped Gilbert-kun, no matter *what* they’re plotting, they wouldn’t do it in the shop. There *must* be a secret room somewhere…and there should be a passage that leads to it. Come, let’s look.”

“Look where?”

Oz glanced around the shop. He sounded a bit bewildered.

The shop also held undergarments meant to be worn under dresses. Like the dresses themselves, the styles were universally bold and provocative. It was a bit much for Oz—ever since he’d entered the boutique, it hadn’t felt quite safe to look at anything.

“What are you blushing about?” Break looked mildly disgusted. “Underwear no one’s worn yet is just cloth.”

Even then, boys’ hearts are such that they can’t easily make that distinction.

Oz began searching the boutique’s interior. In order to inspect the walls, he parted the dresses and undergarments that hung on them. Possibly because the shop catered to the aristocracy, the materials used were of fine quality, and Oz kept catching himself admiring the textures.

Finally, Break noticed a suspicious join in the wall of a fitting room. That section of the wall proved to be a hidden door, and when they opened it, they discovered a set of stairs leading underground.

The two of them descended in the darkness. The stairs led down to a stone corridor that stretched away in three directions: right, left, and straight ahead.

Candleholders topped by small, wavering flames were mounted on the corridor walls at fixed intervals. Thanks to that, they had no trouble seeing.

"This is a really big basement."

Oz sounded surprised; he'd assumed they'd find one or two underground rooms at most.

"It does look as if it cost a pretty penny. Financed by the ladies of the aristocracy, I suspect."

"So…it's an underground temple?"

The problem was which of the three corridors they should take. Which one held Gilbert?

"Well, let's start from the front," Break said, carelessly.

And so…

"—Gil!"

Gilbert was aghast, both at the voice which called him as the door to the stone chamber opened, and by the sight of Oz entering the room immediately after.

Up until now, he'd kept his cool, but his surprise made him momentarily vulnerable. The Great Mother didn't let that chance pass her by. Three of Gilbert's limbs were still tied to the chair, and she threw her weight against it, tipped it over, and spun around, fleeing the room through a different door from the one Oz and Break had entered by.

A confused cry rose from the women who'd been left behind, including Dahlia, but they seemed unable to move. It was possible that none of them understood the situation.

Gilbert, who'd toppled over with the chair, had hit his head in the wrong place; as he watched Oz come running to him, he felt dizzy.

"Oz, what… Why…?"

"What do you mean, 'why'! I'm your master, you're my valet. Of course I'd show up when you're in trouble!"

It's supposed to be the other way around, thought Gilbert. …But this was the Oz he knew.

Oz crouched down beside the fallen Gilbert, hastily trying to untie his legs and other hand. Briefly, Gilbert told him, "Don't bother." He turned the muzzle of his gun on the chair and fired repeatedly, destroying the armrest and legs. Completely freed of his bonds, he got to his feet.

With the exception of Dahlia—who stood where she was, dazed—the women had gathered in a corner of the room and were huddled together, trembling.

Ignoring the women for the time being, Gilbert turned back to Oz and Break.

"You two—"

He looked at Oz, then at Break.

From Break's composed expression, Gilbert could tell he already knew everything. Break gave a teasing smile and said, "We were worried about you, Gilbert-kun! ☆" in a tone that made it obvious that he hadn't

been worried at all.

…*Tch.* Gilbert clicked his tongue, softly.

"Say, Gil?" Oz glanced at the door the Great Mother had vanished through. "Who was the lady that ran off?"

"

unforgiveable crime.

…*Deep down, Dahlia and I are a lot alike*, Gilbert thought.

Still, what he needed to show now wasn't understanding or sympathy. No matter how far they went, Gilbert's world and Dahlia's would never intersect. And so…

And so—

"I won't ever forgive you. Never let me see your face again."

Gilbert's voice was endlessly cold.

Faintly, Dahlia murmured, "—Thank you."

16

She didn't understand. She had no idea what had happened.

Having fled the stone chamber, the Great Mother ran through the underground corridors.

She hadn't understood when the sacrifice intended for her god had abruptly turned a gun on her, and she hadn't understood how two intruders had appeared in the underground chamber, a place whose secret had been so carefully guarded up till now.

The plan had gone wrong.

The idea that this plan, which should *never* have gone wrong, had in fact done so, had thrown her into extreme confusion.

"Why…?! *Why*, my god?!" she screamed, panting for breath.

She was certain none of her actions had been mistaken. Back when her life had held no meaning for her, these scriptures had come into her hands, quite by accident, through a curio dealer. The curio dealer had said that the ancient tome was the only one of its kind in the world.

Through it, she'd come to know an ominous, powerful being. It had been marvelous. *This is it!* she'd thought.

Since then, she had dedicated her life to it, acting as the first servant of the god described in her scriptures.

She had done what must be done, in accordance with the scriptures, and had made the necessary preparations for the grand advent.

According to the scriptures. According to the guidance of her god.

That sacrifice had been the very last key to that plan.

…And yet.

…*I was so close! So close! I'll never forgive them!*

She convinced herself that she was not running away.

The plan had gone awry, but she must not give up. She swore to herself that she would rebuild her organization and carry out the plan without fail.

She reached the foot of the stairs that led to the boutique and ran up without paying much heed to where she was going. …Or rather, she tried to run up, but a blow to the chest sent her flying. She tumbled clumsily into the corridor, with no idea of what had happened.

However, she didn't let go of the scriptures she held in her hands. She must not let go.

"You won't escape."

A young girl's dispassionate voice came to her down the stairs. Although there was still something childlike about it, its complete lack of emotion made it seem lifeless, like the voice of a doll.

The Great Mother looked up. Possibly because she was so terribly confused, she felt no pain. About halfway up the stairs, she found a girl with one leg raised as if she'd just unleashed a kick. The girl lowered her leg, gazing down at the Great Mother with eyes in which no emotion could be read.

Her face was young. However, the inorganic coldness about the girl struck terror into the Great Mother's heart.

Then, almost immediately:

"See that you don't overdo it, Echo…"

From behind the girl, something even more terrible appeared.

"I intend to discipline that one myself…"

"

"…Hmm. I missed."

Vincent raised the gun's faintly smoking muzzle. His murmur sounded unconcerned.

Echo darted a glance back at her master, agreeing in an indifferent voice. "—Yes."

"I suppose it can't be helped. Unlike Nii-san, I'm no good with guns…"

He didn't seem very upset. Vincent glanced at the handgun, then, from about halfway up the stairs, pointed the muzzle back toward the corridor. However, there was no one there—only a small black hole drilled into the corridor wall.

At the same time, they heard the receding sound of the woman's frantic, scrambling footsteps.

"She ran," Echo reported unnecessarily.

"Quite stubborn for a worm, isn't she… No, maybe it's *because* she's a worm."

Vincent's voice was suffused with joy. He and Echo descended the stairs and walked down the corridor, following the woman. Either way, he didn't plan to kill her easily. He intended to toy with her and torment her, acquainting her with the taste of agony and despair.

The woman made a racket as she ran. It was easy to follow her.

Finally, Vincent and Echo found themselves in front of a door at the end of a corridor. The door was open, and the two stepped into the room.

It was an austere room—furnished with only bookcases, a desk, and a sofa—and it was unoccupied.

There was no doubt that the woman had entered this room. However, she was nowhere to be seen.

"My, my," Vincent murmured, entertained. He looked around the room. Echo called his name. When he looked at her, Echo was pointing at a bookcase set next to the wall. Or, no: What she was pointing at wasn't the bookcase itself.

There were signs that it had been moved, and a thin gap was visible in the wall behind it. There was a room behind the bookcase.

"…A secret room, hmm?"

With a sinister little chuckle, Vincent crossed to the bookshelf and peeked through the gap into the room beyond.

He could see the Great Mother's back.

However, she wasn't alone in the room. There was someone else there, a very familiar face.

Vincent…

…regretted having looked from the bottom of his heart.

The Great Mother had fled into the secret library behind the bookcase. In addition to being a library, it was a place for her to pray in peace.

It wasn't a large room: A handful of people would have been enough to fill it. The library held the volumes in her collection that she couldn't leave exposed to the public eye. …Not that any of them could match the value of the scriptures she cradled in her arms.

Here, in the library that she'd assumed would be a safe haven, she stood shocked and transfixed.

Her eyes were wide at the impossible sight that confronted her.

How…could there be someone here?!

A woman was sitting right on the library floor, turning the pages of a book.

Who is she…?! Why is she in this secret room?!

There was something heartwarming about the woman. She had the air of a young child who'd curled up in front of a warm fireplace with a picture book.

This was precisely what the Great Mother found so hard to believe. This was a hidden room, known only to herself. She had personally designed the space below the boutique, and the location of this little room had been selected based on her advanced knowledge of the occult. The bookcase that formed the hidden door was locked with a code that only one well versed in the occult would know.

The woman, who'd been avidly reading the volume, noticed the Great Mother and looked up.

She gasped, and then—shamefacedly, apologetically—said, "Oh, I, I'm sorry! I let myself in…"

"Young lady… How? This is—" the Great Mother panted.

"I, um, well…" As the woman answered, she fidgeted and looked quite sorry.

…It was Ada.

After parting with her brother, Ada's concern had proved too much for her, and she'd returned to the boutique. On entering, she'd discovered the stairs leading underground. Then, since she knew her brother had entered the boutique but didn't see him inside, she'd grown worried and gone down herself, but…

"This cellar is wonderful!"

Abruptly, Ada's eyes sparkled, and her voice was bright and cheerful. It was the sort of response one would expect from a hungry child who'd had a mountain of sweets placed in front of her. Her enthusiasm made the Great Mother flinch and shrink back.

"I was terribly impressed, and I wandered around for a while; I couldn't help it. What a marvelous place!"

She'd been entranced, she said, clasping her hands in front of her chest.

The Great Mother could not have been more confused. Who on earth was this woman? What was unfolding here, before her eyes? She didn't understand it in the least.

Then Ada's eyes fell on the ancient book the Great Mother held. … The scriptures.

"Oh, that's…"

Diffidently, as if drawn to it, she reached out for the book. She took it in a motion that, while excited, exuded elegance, and turned the pages. The Great Mother had thought she was holding onto it carefully, but she'd been caught completely off guard.

Flustered, she reached out in an attempt to take it back.

"Now see here! Give that back! That's more important than life itself! It's my…!!"

However, Ada didn't seem to hear her, and as she looked at the book, her face fell.

Then she gave a sorrowful sigh.

"…So you bought a copy. This book… I have it, too…"

"I have it, too"?

What was she saying? After her initial bewilderment at Ada's words, the Great Mother felt indignation well up inside her. It was a ridiculous lie, she thought, and altogether too rude. She reached out to take back her scriptures, shouting as she did so. "Don't talk nonsense! That text is the only—"

"The only one of its kind in the world. That was what the curio dealer passed it off as, at any rate, so I bought it, but…"

At Ada's dreary murmur, the Great Mother froze.

It was the same. She'd acquired her scriptures in the exact same way.

Ada's shoulders drooped dejectedly, and she sighed as she continued.

"It's such a dreadful counterfeit, isn't it…? It's a crude patchwork of bits from all sorts of magic books, and anyway, it's full of mistakes, and there are scores of typographical errors… As a devotee of the occult, I'm ashamed to have bought such a failure of a book— Oh! Oh, I'm sorry!"

Realizing that what she'd said indirectly disparaged the Great Mother as well, Ada hastily apologized.

…A dreadful…counterfeit? Full of mistakes? A failure…of a book?

The Great Mother didn't have the slightest idea of what was going on.

The scriptures are more important than my life— Yet this girl has a copy, too… What? What?

The Great Mother stood, dazed, unable to utter a word. Thinking she'd angered her, Ada's shoulders shrank inward. She fidgeted nervously as she spoke. "I-I'm terribly sorry. I'm afraid I've said something rude. …Umm, if you'd like, shall I lend you a magic book I do recommend?"

As far as Ada was concerned, the offer was based in sincere apology and goodwill. It also held the innocent, friendly desire to bond with someone who shared her interests.

However, the Great Mother was already poised on the brink of a nervous breakdown. In a hollow voice, she asked a question.

A question she should never have asked.

"What…sort of book…might that be?"

At that, Ada said, "Oh, just wait till you hear!" and rose to her feet with a smile so brilliant it made you wonder where her former dejection had gone. At the abrupt change, the Great Mother took an involuntary step back.

That didn't seem to bother Ada. She came around to the Great Mother's side and put her lips right next to the woman's ear. She whispered happily, as if telling an especially good secret.

"*Wussa-wussa-wussa-wussa-wussa-wussa*……"

The Great Mother froze, as though she were being dragged down by inches to the very bottom of Hell.

She seemed like one who'd come face-to-face with something more terrible than death. In contrast, Ada's expression could have belonged to a young girl merrily picking flowers in a meadow.

As for the eyes that were trained on the two women from the gap in the bookshelf… As Vincent spied on the two, he knew from the look of the whispering Ada and the state of the listening Great Mother just what sort of words were being spoken. Past trauma reared its head inside Vincent. What he'd been told, the things he'd been shown, when Ada had taken him to the other Vessalius mansion earlier…

Finally, as if dispatching a hated enemy, Ada smacked the cover of the scriptures with girlish vehemence, saying, "It's worth ever so much more than *this* book, which can't do a thing but trick people! ☆"

Her words were full of sincere concern for the Great Mother. She gave a lovely smile, like a flower.

It was…

The final blow.

Even when Vincent's darkness touched her, the Great Mother had not screamed.

But, finally, through the underground corridors, and even in the boutique aboveground…

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

…the Great Mother's scream reverberated.

That was the end of the woman who'd made an attempt on Gilbert's life.

Epilogue

Afternoon, the next day.

Oz and Gilbert were alone in Gilbert's apartment in one of Reveil's shabbier neighborhoods. Oz had eaten a lunch Gilbert had fixed for him, and was currently enjoying a cup of tea. As Gilbert washed dishes in the kitchen, he kept sneaking glances at Oz.

He thought Oz probably wanted to talk about the recent incident.

However, as soon as he'd arrived at the apartment, Oz had said, "I'm hungry," and begun badgering him for food, and so far he hadn't said one word about the events of the previous day.

He was eagerly stuffing his face with the scones Gilbert had put out with the tea.

Did he…just come by for lunch?

Gilbert was pretty sure that couldn't be it, but he mentally cocked his head, perplexed.

Gilbert had things he wanted to say regarding yesterday, too.

Or rather, there was something he wanted to check.

What he'd said just before Oz and Break had burst into that stone chamber:

"Unfortunately, my flesh and blood belong to Oz."

He wanted to know whether or not Oz had heard him.

From the timing, he thought, it could have gone either way. …And it wasn't as if he'd be in a bind if Oz had overheard. It hadn't been a lie: It was what Gilbert truly felt. However, if words he'd spoken from his heart when he thought they wouldn't be heard had actually been heard…

—That would be embarrassing.

"Giiil, the scones are gone. Seconds, please. Now."

Having polished off a heaping plate of scones, Oz pestered him for more. In a tone of weary amazement, Gilbert said, "You've had enough already. Eat any more and you won't have room for dinner."

"Aww…" Oz puffed out his cheeks in dissatisfaction.

At the sight of Oz acting his age, Gilbert chuckled and, smiling, brought the teapot over.

Oz drained his teacup and held it out, saying, "Thank you."

As Gilbert poured fresh, hot tea, he studied Oz.

I'll ask casually, nonchalantly—

"Say, Gil?" Oz spoke casually. "You are going to get married eventually, right? Someday, to somebody."

His voice wasn't teasing, but it didn't sound grave, either. Gilbert fell silent, wondering where *that* had come from. Then he remembered what he and Oz had said, in this apartment, two nights ago.

"Gil, are you getting married?"

"…I might. If I did, I'd prefer a lady like her."

What had he been thinking when he said those words? Right: He'd been bitter about being teased by Oz and Break.

He'd said it as if he was rising to the bait, picking up the gauntlet. It hadn't meant anything more than that.

What had Oz been feeling just now, when he'd brought up marriage again? Gilbert didn't know.

However, he gave a brief sigh.

"…I won't. I don't even think I could."

"Why not? You're kind of a wimp, but you're nice, and you're really good at chores. You're ultra-prime real estate."

"…The 'wimp' was uncalled for, and when aristocrats get married, chores don't come into it."

"Are you sure…?" Oz looked doubtful.

"Besides… None of that is the reason."

Gilbert's answer was brusque. At that, Oz said, as nonchalantly as ever, "Because your flesh and blood are mine?"

He did *hear that!*

Gilbert felt his face go hot. He'd professed his loyalty to Oz many, many times before. He knew it was nothing to be embarrassed about now, but he couldn't help it. He turned away from Oz.

He could feel Oz's eyes, watching his profile.

"Gil."

"…"

Gilbert was silent for a long, long time. Finally:

"For now," he answered.

Oz gave a mischievous laugh. "Heh-heh!"

That smile made Gilbert feel a vague chagrin, and he continued. "If I ever get married, it'll be after you do."

"Huh? Me?"

"You're the next head of the House of Vessalius, you know. You'll have to."

"Ah… Will I? I guess I will, huh…" Oz muttered; he didn't seem very enthused about the idea. He looked up at the ceiling, and his expression grew thoughtful.

It looked as though he was visualizing his own future.

Himself, with a loving family.

"—I can't even imagine that," he muttered, as if tossing the words away.

What sort of thoughts did those words carry? What did they mean?

They might have held nothing at all. Then again, they might have held many things. It was impossible to tell from Oz's voice and expression.

Gilbert didn't know how to respond. He thought for a little while.

"What's the point in saying stuff like that? If we both stay single until

we're old geezers…"

At that, Oz blinked a bit. Then he grinned.

"If that happens, let's sun ourselves in the garden together. Side by side, on the same bench."

"…"

Gilbert imagined it.

Decades from now. A wrinkled old version of Oz, and himself, ten years wrinklier, soaking up the sun in the garden of the Vessalius manor. He imagined them having conversations like this: "Ho-ho-ho, Gil, wouldja fetch me some of that there tea?" "Yeeees, Young Master Oz. *Up* we get, oof! Phew…"

It felt very idyllic, and warm—

"…That wouldn't be bad."

At Gilbert's murmur, Oz immediately grimaced.

"Huh? Yuck, no, I'd hate that. I just imagined it and it gave me chills. Ugh…"

"Why?! It'd be nice and peaceful. What's wrong with that?"

Gilbert was stung. Still grimacing, Oz said, "It's peaceful, but it's too bland. If there aren't any cute girls around, I won't stand for it!"

Oz sounded petulant. Gilbert argued right back.

The apartment was filled with loud voices, and it stayed that way for a good long time…

It was noisy, lively, and somehow gentle.

A scene from the sort of pair who seemed likely to stay together for life.

That night.

After taking Oz back to Pandora Headquarters, Gilbert stopped by his apartment again, then headed for the Nightray manor. He walked down Reveil's bustling high street. He was returning the suit he'd worn to meet Dahlia.

As he wove his way through the throngs of people, Gilbert thought back over the previous day.

After he'd said those final words to Dahlia in the stone chamber, the Great Mother's scream had echoed through the whole underground complex.

When they looked for her, they found her collapsed in what seemed to be a secret room. She was unconscious, and on her face was the expression of a woman who'd encountered some indescribable horror… But there was no one else in the room. Gilbert and the others could only wonder.

Even Break didn't seem to understand what had happened.

Gilbert and Dahlia parted ways in front of the boutique.

He doubted he'd ever see her again. He didn't know what she planned to do now. Would she go on as before, living with her father's body hidden in the manor? If so, would it remain undetected by the outside world? What would happen if people found out?

Whatever happened, it was nothing to do with him anymore. She'd probably vanish from his memories someday, as well.

"All women are venemous spiders," eh…?

He remembered what his brother had said to him, when he'd returned to the Nightray manor to borrow the suit.

It just might be true.

Even Dahlia, who'd seemed so quiet and modest, had had venom… Darkness. Maybe everyone, man or woman, hid similar darkness, even if it wasn't visible on the surface. Just when Gilbert's mood had turned gloomy…a lovely voice and face abruptly rose in the back of his mind.

"Gil, don't. You mustn't look so sullen."

Ada-sama…

She moved in an atmosphere of soft warmth and gentleness.

There was no woman less suited to the words "hidden venom" than Ada…no matter who else might have it.

I want to see Ada-sama, Gilbert thought, with no reason for thinking it. …He wanted to see her, and chat with her about trivial things, and have her scold him for getting so gloomy. That said, Gilbert wasn't the sort who could just go see her without an excuse, and he wasn't clever enough to come up with an excuse where none existed.

No, that's wrong, Gilbert rebuked himself. *You're trying to lean on her, like a little kid. Grow up.*

You've got to pull yourself together.

When he reached the Nightray manor, he thought, he'd have to look in on his little brother as well.

He had to tell him that the Dahlia affair was over.

"Haaaah…"

Feeling quite unmotivated, Gilbert gave a dreary sigh.

"He's refusing all visitors?"

Echo had been the one to tell Gilbert this. When Gilbert had arrived at the Nightray manor and visited Vincent's private room, he'd found her standing in front of the door.

Echo nodded.

"He says he won't see anyone for two or three days."

"Has he collapsed? …Is he sick?"

"No." Echo shook her head. Still expressionless, she looked down slightly, as if thinking. "He has…some slight mental trauma."

Gilbert looked puzzled. Mental trauma? To the point where he was avoiding people? Gilbert couldn't begin to imagine what would cause a situation like that.

Still, it was a relief not to have to talk about Dahlia.

"I see," he told Echo. Just as he was about to turn on his heel, the door opened with a *click* and Vincent looked out.

His handsome, clean-cut face seemed slightly haggard. "Vince…" Gilbert was about to say something concerned, but Vincent got in first.

Facing his older brother, as if trying to make things very clear, he said, "You really should forget that woman, Nii-san……"

Forget Dahlia? Gilbert thought, but as if he'd read his mind, Vincent shook his head.

"No, not that one…"

Although he'd been about to say something, he sighed, then drew back into the room again.

Click. The door closed.

Who had he meant? Gilbert racked his brains, but no one came to mind.

The expressionless Echo watched Gilbert with cold eyes.

And—

"Haaah…"

Seated on the sofa in the drawing room of her uncle Oscar's private residence, Ada sighed sadly.

Oscar, who was on his way through carrying documents of some sort, asked, "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing."

With a laugh that was slightly strained, Ada shook her head; she was determined not to worry her uncle. She stole a glance at Oscar, remembering what her brother had told her in front of the boutique. She wanted to ask him about it, but she'd promised to pretend not to have seen or heard anything. She banished her curiosity from her mind.

Ada had been remembering the previous day. Worried about her brother, she'd gone down into the cellar. In an underground room, she'd met a woman who, like Ada herself, was interested in the occult. Happy and exhilarated, she'd tried to talk to her about this and that, but—it had been a first meeting, after all; maybe she'd moved too quickly—she'd startled the woman terribly.

When the woman had collapsed, Ada had been worried and had gone outside to call for help, but she'd gotten lost in the city streets.

When, with much difficulty, she'd found her way back to the boutique, the door had been shut and locked.

She'd called into the shop, but had received no reply. Today, when she'd gone by the shop again, someone had posted a sign on the door that said CLOSED INDEFINITELY.

She'd felt she had to apologize to the woman for startling her.

If, by some chance, the woman had forgiven her…

…What a pity. It had been such a good opportunity.

"Did something happen? C'mon, tell your uncle." Oscar sat down on the sofa opposite Ada, speaking magnanimously. "It doesn't matter if it's little or silly. I'll hear you out."

His words made her happy. Ada giggled, self-consciously, then began. "All right. Umm, I was thinking that it's very hard to make friends who share my interests."

At her words, Oscar grunted briefly. "Hmm."

For a little while, he closed his eyes as if he was thinking. Finally, he looked at Ada with a grin, and said something that, just maybe, he should never have said under any circumstances:

"It might be better if you took someone you're already friends with and cunningly lured her in."

…As in, into Ada's hobby.

Oscar's suggestion had never occurred to Ada before. For a short while, she was silent.

Then, in a small voice, she murmured, "I see… I'll take a beginner's book next time, and…"

Whether Ada went on to put her plan into action or not remains a mystery.

~ Fin ~

The Story
of
THE RAINSWORTHS

WHITE KITTY

A Prim and Proper Quandary

1

It happened one night.

It was the wee hours of the morning, and the moon was approaching its zenith in the night sky.

In a spacious bedroom at the main residence of the House of Rainsworth, one of the four great dukedoms, Sheryl was sitting up in bed.

Sheryl Rainsworth. Although she was elderly and normally used a wheelchair to get around, the years had stolen none of her elegance and grace.

In aristocratic society, where male dominance was still quite common, the House of Rainsworth was unusual in that the Rainsworth women held strong influence. As the head of the family, Sheryl was well-respected, not only by the Rainsworths, but by the aristocracy as a whole.

"—Hee-hee!"

With a charming smile on her lips, Sheryl glanced at the window. The curtains were drawn, but a thin shaft of moonlight slipped in between them.

Sheryl raised one hand and cupped it to her ear, as if she was listening closely to catch a faint sound.

Then she murmured, pleasantly:

"The cat seems to be making noise again tonight. That sweet little kitten…"

2

The young lady was troubled.

In the afternoon of the following day, as she stood before the vanity in her room at the Rainsworth mansion:

"Could I possibly be _____?" Sharon muttered, gazing at her reflection in the mirror. Both her voice and her face were glum, dreary and dejected. "…"

Sharon glared at her face as though she was trying to stare it down. Realizing that her forehead was creased, she forced a cheerful smile. The

Sharon in the mirror broke into a flawlessly ladylike smile that would have been quite at home at any society function.

It didn't last long, though.

"Haaah…"

Sharon sighed listlessly, hanging her head.

This is depressing… After I'd determined to do my best, too…

"Haaaaaaaaaaah." She gave a long sigh.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. From the hallway, a voice called, "Sharon-sama, may I come in?" When Sharon banished her gloomy atmosphere and said, "Yes, go ahead," the door opened quietly and one of the maids who worked at the mansion entered.

With the door at her back, the maid bowed to Sharon, then came forward.

Closer inspection revealed that she was holding a small package.

"You've received a parcel, miss. Here it is."

"…?"

The maid held the package out respectfully, with both hands. Sharon took it, puzzled.

She hadn't been expecting anything from anybody. From the weight and feel of the package, she guessed that it was a book, and she checked the sender's name. It was a bookstore Sharon frequented.

At that, she remembered.

"You're right. It's the book I'd ordered."

When Sharon nodded slightly, the maid bowed again, turned briskly and walked to the door.

Sharon let her eyes fall to the package. Then:

"…Haaah."

Though her order had arrived, Sharon didn't seem happy. In fact, she seemed disappointed. At her sigh, the maid turned back.

Sharon gave a troubled smile.

"A little while ago, I wasn't able to find a book I was looking for, so I asked them to send me a copy if one came into their hands. Later on, though, I found the book at another bookstore, and I already have it. I forgot to cancel my order."

"…If you have no use for it, miss, shall I dispose of it for you?" the maid asked, solicitously.

Sharon told her there was no need to go that far. The maid bowed again and left the room.

Sharon had ordered one of her favorite things: a romance novel.

The book was a work that one of her favorite authors had published in the past under a different name. It was now quite hard to find, and was said to be an elusive gem. She really should have been delighted, but the fact that this was a duplicate copy made that difficult.

Since it was here, however, Sharon thought she should at least put it on her bookshelf with the rest, and she unwrapped the parcel.

When the cover of the book emerged from its wrappings:

"Oh?"

Sharon sounded puzzled. "…This isn't what I ordered," she murmured.

The parcel held a book she'd never heard of by an author she didn't know.

Someone else's package must have been delivered to her by mistake, she thought.

In that case, she should return it to the bookstore.

Just as Sharon rewrapped the book, there was another knock at the door, and a voice called in:

"Sharon-sama?"

The voice belonged to a different maid from the one who'd just left. At Sharon's "Come in," the door opened, and she entered.

The maid bowed to Sharon.

"Sheryl-sama would like to speak with you. She requests that you come to her study."

"Grandmother? Yes, I see."

Sharon told the maid she'd go right away.

After the maid had departed, Sharon glanced at the wrapped book in her hand. Then she placed it in front of the vanity and rose to her feet. She'd considered giving the book to the maid to take care of, but she wanted to enclose a message for the bookstore, asking them to cancel her previous order.

I'll deal with this book later, then.

Having made up her mind, she checked her hair and clothes in the mirror to make sure nothing was out of place. Everything was perfect.

Even so, Sharon's reflection in the mirror seemed somehow dispirited…

I may be _____.

She couldn't get the thought out of her head, and it dragged her mood lower and lower.

…Still.

I mustn't let Grandmother see me like this.

She shook her head, summoning a bright smile. *There.* Sharon nodded approvingly to herself, then left the room. At that, the room was empty.

A few minutes later.

"Sharon, it's me!"

Baaaaaam!

Flinging the door open with a complete lack of manners and absolutely no reserve, a girl entered the room.

No sooner had she done so than she struck an arrogant pose. The haughty voice and attitude marked her as Alice, beyond a doubt.

“You said you had some good sweets, so I came all the way over here in person, just for you— Hmm?”

The sight of the empty room perplexed Alice.

She strode to the center of the room and folded her arms, looking irritated.

“What, she summoned me and she isn’t even here?” she snarled, glancing around the room.

Abruptly, her eyes found the parcel that lay on the vanity. *A box of sweets?!* Alice thought. She crossed to the vanity with a bounce and picked up the parcel. *If we’re going to eat this anyway*, she thought, *she won’t mind if I open it*. So she opened it.

But what emerged from the wrappings wasn’t a box of sweets.

It was a book.

On registering the difference, Alice gave a dissatisfied little growl.

Alice knew that Sharon loved books—particularly “romans novels,” or whatever they were called. She’d once been the target of an enthusiastic lecture on how wonderful they were. She’d been told that they were the bible of “maidenly feelings” and “melting hearts,” and just packed with sweet-and-sour sentiments. Sharon’s intensity had been impressive, Alice thought.

She’d been told to call Sharon “Sharon Onee-sama,” but she hadn’t understood it at all.

Only, when she *had* called her that because there was no help for it, Sharon had wriggled with joy.

…Alice really didn’t understand it.

“Grrr, I don’t get it. Something edible would be a lot better than something like this.”

Alice flipped through the book with a bored expression, muttering complaints.

Suddenly, the hand that was turning the pages stopped.

She’d spotted an illustration.

“??? …What’s this…?”

Alice cocked her head, confused, and thought hard.

3

“Oh, Alice-san.”

Sharon’s conversation with Sheryl, her grandmother, hadn’t taken very long at all, and when she returned to her room, there was Alice.

Alice was standing at the far end of the room, facing the window. When Sharon called to her, she jumped and whirled around, looking terribly startled.

“Sha-Sha-Sharon?! You…!”

“Good afternoon,” Sharon said smoothly, nodding to her. She glanced at the room’s clock.

“You’re early, aren’t you. There’s still an hour left before we’d planned to meet.”

She’d sent a messenger to Pandora with a note saying she’d found a confection she thought Alice would like, and asking her to tea. In the message, she’d invited Oz and Gilbert as well, but she didn’t see them.

“Alice-san? Where are the others?”

“Huh? O-o-o-oh, *them*! Since we got here early, they said they were going to look at the rose garden or something—”

Alice seemed nervous.

“…Alice-san?” Sharon murmured, curiously.

Alice’s behavior struck her as odd. It wasn’t a problem if Oz and Gilbert were out looking at the Rainsworth rose garden, and of course it wasn’t a problem that Alice had come to her room early, by herself. However, there was something strange about *this particular* Alice.

The moment Alice had seen Sharon, she’d begun to inch backward, trying to put as much distance between them as possible. However, she soon came up against the window glass and was unable to go any farther.

A cloud of question marks floated above Sharon’s head.

Whatever’s the matter? She seems quite tense…

No, “tense” wasn’t the word…

Wary? Is she frightened of something? …Of what? Of me?

But why?

Even as Alice watched Sharon, she kept glancing away. When Sharon followed her gaze, her eyes found a book lying on the sofa that stood against the wall.

It was the book Sharon had rewrapped and left on the vanity.

Aha, Sharon thought, hiding a smile.

While she was alone, Alice had stealthily unwrapped the parcel and looked at its contents, and before she could wrap it up again, the room’s mistress had returned. That was why Alice was flustered. She was afraid Sharon might be angry with her.

…The question of whether Alice really had such a commendable personality did cross Sharon’s mind. However, she couldn’t think of any other reason for this reaction.

“Haah… Alice-san?”

Simply being addressed was enough to make Alice flinch.

Then she looked at Sharon with timid eyes that seemed to beg for forgiveness. She’d teared up just a little.

—My, how adorable! ☆ Sharon thought, privately.

Of course, although her arrogant speech and behavior normally canceled it out, Alice was a pretty girl.

Huddled up, she was as cute as a small animal; a squirrel or a rabbit, perhaps.

I won't shout at her, but I really should caution her.

Not being bound by rules and manners was one of Alice's charms, but even so…

Sharon crossed to the sofa, picked up the book, and set it aside. Then she sat down.

She patted the cushion next to her, beckoning Alice over.

This is for Alice's sake. Oz-sama lets her have her own way a bit too much.

Yes, it certainly wasn't because Alice was so cute when she was frightened that it had put mischievous thoughts into her head.

Not in the least.

"Come, Alice-san. Come here."

Sharon smiled, encouraging her. However, Alice shook her head.

"N-no, but I —"

"…Alice-san?" Sharon's smile grew brighter.

"……"

Timidly, fearfully, Alice approached the sofa. She was still sneaking glances at the book. Stealthily, as if to keep as much distance between them as possible, she sat on the very end of the sofa. Sharon promptly moved over, narrowing the gap.

"Wah!" Alice gave a little scream.

Sharon frowned a bit sadly at this oversensitive reaction.

"Don't be so frightened. You'll hurt my feelings."

"I-I didn't mean to! I-I don't, but, well, you know…"

As Alice desperately defended herself, Sharon giggled.

"I'm only joking. ♪—Now, then…"

When she lowered her tone slightly, Alice shrank even further.

"You looked at the book, didn't you."

"Uhh…"

"You mustn't peek at others' belongings without permission. That's a breach of etiquette."

"B-but I—"

"Now. What should we do about it?"

Sharon spoke in a whisper, putting her face very close to Alice's. Alice's expression was bewildered; she didn't seem to know how to respond. Sharon thought that was adorable, too. …Her heart began to flutter impatiently.

She was in the mood for a bit of mischief.

Life would be such fun if I had a little sister like Alice-san… Sharon thought, wistfully.

She was sure the days would be pleasant, and boisterous, and never, ever dull.

She leaned even closer to Alice.

“Alice-san—”

“Wh-what are you trying to do, Sharon?!”

“Onee-sama.”

“Huh?” Alice looked nonplussed.

“Call me Onee-sama, please.”

Little by little, Sharon’s engines were warming up.

“It isn’t as if it’s the first time, you know. Go on.”

Sharon’s tone wasn’t at all threatening. On the contrary, it was gentle and affectionate.

…Some things are much scarier that way.

Alice caved easily to Sharon’s mild pressure, obeying nervously even as her face betrayed confusion.

Looking at Sharon with tear-filled eyes, in a voice so faint it was scarcely audible, she said:

“O…Onee-sama…”

Eeeeeek!! ☆

Sharon secretly rejoiced. *That’s marvelous no matter how many times I hear it!*

However, she didn’t let the emotion show in her face. She gave a faint smile.

“You’re a naughty girl, Alice. Helping yourself to other people’s belongings.”

Sharon began to address Alice informally, without thinking about it. She was in very high spirits.

“We’ll just have to discipline you, won’t we?”

“Discipline?” Alice sounded agitated.

“Yes,” Sharon said, putting her face even closer to Alice’s. However, after that point, she didn’t actually have a plan. *What shall I do?* she thought. She could tickle her, or poke her soft cheeks… That sounded pleasant.

“Waaaaahh…”

Anxiety. Fear. Worry.

As Alice moaned, all these emotions were plain to see. Finally, she shut her eyes tightly.

She seemed to have resigned herself to the fact that there was no escape. Then, as if something had burst, Alice spoke in a loud, energetic voice.

“A-all right! Do whatever you want to me!”

Her eyes flew open and she stared—or rather glared—right at Sharon.

Her gaze was steady. She was fully prepared.

…*Huh?*

This time it was Sharon’s turn to feel bewildered.

She’d never dreamed that Alice would take this particular attitude.

Although she managed—barely—to keep it out of her expression, inside, Sharon was terribly flustered.

Alice's next move made Sharon doubt her eyes.

Suddenly, Alice put her hands to her jacket and pulled the front open. Her smooth skin lay daringly exposed. Her face was serious. It was the expression of a soldier heading to the battlefield, prepared to die.

Alice's skin, which was slightly flushed with excitement or shame, seemed to leap out at Sharon.

"Wh-wh-what are you doing, Alice-san?!"

Naturally, Sharon lost her composure and raised her voice. This was far from anything she'd imagined or anticipated.

She couldn't bring herself to believe that Alice had masochistic tendencies, but—

As if to say "It's gone too far, and there's no stopping now!" Alice lunged at Sharon.

"Th-this is what you wanted, isn't it, Onee-sama?! All right, come on, Onee-sama, Onee-sama, Onee-sama!"

"Wai–! Wa-wa-wa-wa-wait just a minute, Alice-san!"

Sharon leaned back; she didn't even have the wherewithal to enjoy the series of "Onee-samas."

Their positions had been completely reversed.

Sharon could not have been more confused. She had no idea what was happening.

Wh-wh-wh-what's going on? Is Alice-san trying to…to seduce me—?!

On the sofa, Alice pressed forward, while Sharon drew back.

In no time at all, though, they reached the end of the sofa. Alice's hands caught Sharon's arm and pulled it to her. Even if she tried to escape, Sharon could never beat Alice in a physical struggle. She'd only meant to lecture Alice on manners. Yes, she'd let a bit of mischief creep in, but that didn't explain this particular development. She couldn't understand it.

…She had a fleeting thought that it might be divine punishment for the mischief.

Alice brought Sharon's hand to her bared chest. Her voice was feverish and earnest:

"Go on, Sharon…"

She pressed Sharon's palm flat against her skin.

Ooh, it's so soft— No! Get ahold of yourself, Sharon!

Finding herself involuntarily impressed by the texture of Alice's skin, Sharon mentally smacked herself.

It was completely incomprehensible, but at any rate, Alice was serious. There was no other possible interpretation.

Sharon had always assumed that Alice preferred eating to romance and was completely indifferent to love, but…

Was Alice-san a girl of "that" persuasion, and I simply never realized

it…?!

Sharon's mind whirled with confusion.

Did Oz know that Alice was a Sapphist? If he didn't, should she tell him? —No, this was a delicate matter… Sharon didn't know what to do. For the moment, she thought, she really must say something to Alice.

…But what? She didn't have time to think at her leisure. First, then—

"Please wait, Alice-san!"

Sharon checked her. She felt she had to explain this properly. There was nothing wrong with falling in love with somebody. She was terribly flattered that Alice liked her.

However, she was unable to reciprocate.

"Come on, Sharon! I mean, Onee-sama!" Sharon hadn't gotten through to Alice at all.

"Alice-san, listen…!"

"'Eat' me!"

"'Eat'—?!" Sharon blushed, flabbergasted.

"Yeah! —Like in that book!"

Alice pointed sharply at the book, which had fallen off the sofa and now lay on the floor.

…Huh?

Sharon's mind had sailed past confusion and was now an enormous blank.

With her arm still caught in Alice's grip, Sharon twisted around to look at the book on the floor, trying to see what Alice was talking about.

The book had opened when it fell.

By sheer coincidence, it was open to the illustration Alice had seen.

Sharon's eyes took in the meticulously detailed drawing.

Instantly, her mind boiled over.

Two women, kissing…!!!!

"I know. I know all about it now. It's all right!"

Managing to free herself from Alice, who was speaking emphatically, Sharon stood up, book in hand. She glanced at the text on the page that faced the illustration. It depicted an exchange between two women. In the scene, they kissed and confessed ardent emotions to each other. Actually, in the text, they didn't stop at kissing.

It was…

The book was…

"A novel of forbidden romance"…!!

Sharon felt dizzy.

Not only that, but the women in the book were canoodling on a sofa in a room somewhere.

On top of that, the older woman was making the younger one call her "Onee-sama."

In other words, the scene looked

A W H O L E L O T

like Sharon and Alice did at the moment.

I have to explain this to Alice-san right away, Sharon thought.

She had to tell her it wasn't what it looked like. This was not her book; it belonged to someone else, and had simply been delivered to her by mistake. It certainly did not reflect her personal preferences. Sharon turned to face Alice.

As she did, something struck her as odd.

Before, when Sharon had shown Alice a romance novel and Alice had seen an illustration of a kissing scene, she hadn't understood what it was.

Alice was terribly naive about all such things—or so she'd thought.

Had innocent Alice understood this book after a mere glance…?

This is…strange.

Privately, Sharon was dubious. Seeming concerned for Sharon, Alice spoke, as if to encourage her:

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. It must be a real pain, though…"

At that point, she hesitated just a bit, fumbling for the words.

"Smoochie Sweetruno Disease… I mean, I hear they haven't found a way to treat it yet."

"Smooch…? Could you repeat that?" Sharon was dazed.

"Smoochie Sweetruno Disease. Apparently it's an incredibly rare illness."

"…What? What a ridiculous name…"

"You've got a rare disease that will kill you if you don't drink energy from living things, don't you, Sharon?"

Sharon had absolutely no idea what Alice was talking about.

However, as Alice continued, Sharon understood everything. She understood, all right…much to her regret.

Alice told her, "I heard all about it from the old clown."

Ohhh… So that's what it was.

Sharon felt her face cool down abruptly. As a matter of fact, her overall temperature dropped.

At the sudden change in Sharon's mood, Alice frowned, puzzled. Although, for a moment, the air around her had darkened, Sharon smiled almost immediately and looked at Alice. Then she urged Alice to tell her everything, in detail.

The story she drew from Alice was about what Sharon had expected it would be.

"Sharon, it's me!"

Having flung open the door with a bang and entered the room, Alice mistook the wrapped book on the vanity for a box of sweets, picked it up, and was disappointed when she realized her mistake. Then, as she absently leafed through the pages, an illustration seemed to jump out at her.

It was a drawing of two women in the altogether: a young woman being pinned down by an older woman.

Alice looked blank.

That particular content was, in a sense, advanced, and as Sharon had guessed, it hadn't made much sense to Alice. However, just then:

"Hello there, Alice-kun. Welcome!"

Break entered from outside, throwing a leg over the window frame, as if he'd just dropped out of the sky.

Startled by his sudden appearance, Alice let go of the book. It fell to the floor, with the open pages facing down.

As Break approached, waving genially, Alice immediately dropped into a fighting stance, radiating suspicion.

"Hissssssssssss! Stay back, you old clown!"

Break seemed unperturbed. He crossed to Alice and retrieved the book from the floor.

Alice watched him closely, keeping her guard up.

Break gazed at the open pages. "*Oho,"* he murmured. And then he said, *"Well, well! Would you look at* that*. …Heh-heh, the lower girl is being thoroughly 'eaten.'"*

Eaten? At the unexpected word, Alice looked perplexed.

Then, understanding it, her expression turned triumphant.

"Ha-ha! Did your eye finally rot out, clown?! What about that *looks like a meal to you?!"*

However, Break calmly shook his head. *"No, no. Alice-kun, 'eating' isn't limited to sinking your teeth into something and gnawing away, you know."*

At Break's words, Alice forgot her suspicion almost instantly. *"What's that supposed to mean?"* she'd asked, deeply interested.

Then Break had explained everything to Alice, with brilliant, modulated, highly believable storytelling. This picture, he'd said, showed someone dining by making skin contact with a partner and drinking her energy, or "life force." The life force absorbed from a partner you fancied was an incredible delicacy, he told her.

After hearing him out all the way to the end, Alice sighed. *"Oooh…"*

Even Chains weren't able to absorb life force through mere touch. Alice held the book up in front of her face again, studying it carefully.

Then, with a grave expression, she said, *"…Don't tell me Sharon likes this sort of story, too…"*

"'Like' isn't quite the word. …She's using it as a reference*."*

"A re…ference?" Alice echoed. She had a bad feeling about this.

"Yes." Break nodded, and his face was the picture of sorrow. After telling her, solemnly, that since she'd seen the book there was no help for it, but that he wanted her to keep this a secret from everyone else, he'd said, *"My lady is troubled because she has a similar constitution."*

Alice gulped. *"She does?"* she muttered, hoarsely. She'd had no idea.

Faced with this weighty reality, Alice was speechless.

Break had bowed his head and covered his face with his hands; his shoulders were trembling. Alice thought he was probably thinking of Sharon and crying.

Finally, Break lowered his hands and counseled Alice.

"It's more of a disease *than a constitution, really. My lady is suffering from an illness so rare it affects only one in several hundred thousand people. Due to that rarity, there is no cure, and my lady would really rather no one knew about it. And so…"*

At that point, Break made a request. He was almost pleading.

"If my lady tries to eat you, would you please indulge her?"

Alice felt a horrendous shock, as though she'd been struck by lightning. She was confused, and enraged, and said, *"Oh yeah right! Wh-wh-wh-why do I have to do a thing like that for that woman?! It's not my problem!"*

She absolutely refused to be eaten. Alice turned her face away in a huff. Break watched her, steadily.

There was nothing pushy about his gaze.

He just looked at Alice, quietly.

Even so, Alice snorted and closed her eyes, as though trying to escape Break's stare.

…Sharon, suffering from a mysterious illness.

However, only people who were very close to her knew about it, and ordinarily, Sharon hid her illness, acting as though nothing was wrong.

Of course, that didn't mean that Alice had to give up her own life force for her.

Obviously not. She absolutely refused.

…But even so, a little pain of unknown origin had begun to prickle inside her chest.

Finally, Alice opened her eyes and looked at Break nervously.

"Y-you're sure… I couldn't just bite her cheek, instead of letting her eat me? It'll cheer her up, you know."

"Although I appreciate the thought…" Break shook his head, sadly. It wouldn't do any good, he said.

Alice looked a bit like a cornered small animal.

"I-I'm sorry she's sick. But, I-I'm just here today because she called me…"

"She called you?"

"Yeah. She said she had some yummy sweets. I-I don't see them anywhere in here, but still."

"…I see." On hearing Alice's appeal, Break murmured, significantly. Then: *"No, they're here. Or rather, they've just arrived."*

Break was watching Alice. In a voice that instilled unease into the heart of its listener, he said, *"They're right* here.*"*

He pointed at Alice.

In spite of herself, Alice came very near to screaming as if she'd just heard a horrifying ghost story. However, before she could, Break's expression abruptly sharpened. *"My lady is returning,"* he told her. Then he turned on his heel and left the way he'd come in: through the window.

As he was leaving, he made one last, poignant entreaty:

"Smoochie Sweetruno Disease. That is the name of my lady's affliction. Please, Alice-kun. It's all right. It won't kill *you……"*

He'd departed like a gust of wind. Alice could only stare dazedly at the window through which Break had made his exit.

And then Sharon had entered.

"—And that's what happened."

Alice wasn't very good at explaining things clearly to people, and when she'd finished, she gave a small sigh.

"…"

Sharon, who'd listened carefully, was silent and expressionless. When Alice asked, "What's wrong?" and peered into her face, concerned, Sharon smiled brightly.

"Is it. I see."

"…Y-yeah." Overawed, Alice nodded.

"You were worried about me, weren't you, Alice-san? That was kind of you. However, I'm afraid it was quite unnecessary. He was only teasing you."

"Teasing…?" Alice was dumbfounded. For a while, she stared blankly back at Sharon. Then: "*Of course* I picked up on that!!" Alice threw out her chest, arrogantly. She put her hands on her hips and laughed loudly —"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"—but the effect was so funny and sweet that Sharon only smiled pleasantly. She gave a decorous little laugh. However, behind her back, a rumbling, black aura was spreading ominously.

Alice didn't register Sharon's state.

"I-I'm very generous, you know, so when I heard the old clown's stupid little story, I decided I'd play along with it, as a special favor to him. I mean it. —Oh, and I wasn't worried about you at all, all right?! Not at all!"

She embellished this desperate appeal with a flurry of gestures.

"Alice-san."

Sharon checked Alice, as if to say she understood. Her tone was perfectly calm, but it made Alice hold her tongue in spite of herself.

Sharon rose from the sofa. Her movements were elegant and polite… but a certain threatening weight hung about them.

She bowed to Alice; her expression was apologetic.

"…Alice-san. I haven't shown you any hospitality yet, and I do apologize, but do you think you could go home for today? I'll explain everything to Oz-sama and Gilbert-sama later. I'm very sorry, but our tea party will have to wait."

The declaration of postponement came abruptly and without sufficient explanation. However:

"—Uh…uh-huh."

Alice behaved, obediently leaving Sharon's room.

4

"Alice-chan?"

After Alice had left Sharon's room, just as she'd reached the Rainsworth mansion's entry hall, a voice hailed her from behind. "Nn?" Turning, she saw an elderly woman in a wheelchair being pushed by a servant.

Alice recognized the lady; she'd seen her several times before. It was Sheryl, the head of the House of Rainsworth. Sheryl had a cape spread

over her knees, and resting on the cape was a good-sized cardboard box, elegantly wrapped.

"Huhn. What do you want?"

"I'm terribly sorry about my Sharon-chan. She invited you, and then she didn't even entertain you…" She held out the box, saying, "Please take this."

"What is it?" Alice muttered. She approached Sheryl and accepted the box.

"It's the confection Sharon-chan meant to give you. It's a new offering from one of our favorite patisseries: a chestnut cake. They're quite proud of it. If you'd like, do take it back to Pandora with you and enjoy it with the others."

"…Oho. Cake, huh?"

Sheryl chuckled.

"I wonder if you wouldn't have preferred meat instead."

"Of course. I don't hate sweet things, but if you're asking me which is better, it's obviously meat."

Alice boldly declared herself a meat-lover. Then her face grew thoughtful. "But…"

Oz liked sweet things. If she took this back to him, it was sure to make him happy. He'd probably be grateful to her for bringing it— As she thought about it, Alice smiled, just a little bit.

"Hmph!" Alice puffed out her chest. "Well, if you insist, I suppose I'll take it off your hands."

"Yes, that would make me very happy."

As she chuckled, Sheryl was like an artless child. However, her expression abruptly clouded. She glanced upstairs, where the private rooms of the mansion's residents were located, and gave a small sigh.

"Honestly, I don't know what we're going to do with Xerx-kun. Still —" At that, Sheryl's eyes turned to Alice. "Thanks to you, Sharon-chan seems to have recovered somewhat. I'm grateful to you."

"Recovered? So she actually was sick?"

Alice was worried. Sheryl shook her head.

"No, my granddaughter is quite well. She was afflicted by…shall we say, an emotional ailment. However, that seems to have greatly improved, and again, it was your doing. Thank you for your concern, though."

"Um, no, I wasn't really…"

Alice fidgeted self-consciously. Watching her, Sheryl broke into a smile. "My, how adorable. ✧" Apparently, blood did tell: She looked remarkably like Sharon.

Suddenly, as though she'd been struck by a good idea, Sheryl said, "Alice-chan, I don't suppose you'd come to live with me, would you?"

"…Huh?" Alice's eyes went round.

"If you lived with me, I'd make sure you had all the sweets and meat

you wanted."

"Meat?! As much meat as I can eat…?!"

Struck by a fearsome attack spell, Alice shuddered. She staggered, taking a step back. Sheryl smiled and added, "I hear Sharon-chan's mentioned wanting to adopt you," but Alice's mind was completely occupied with meat, and the words didn't reach her.

Meat. As much as I can eat.

How sweet the words sounded! Alice's feelings wavered helplessly. She seemed a breath away from latching on to the offer.

Sheryl watched her, smiling cheerfully.

However, finally:

"No. I can't. I can't do that," Alice said, flatly. All hesitation was gone from her face.

"Oh," murmured Sheryl.

"This isn't where I'm supposed to be. Not here—"

At Alice's declaration, Sheryl nodded, satisfied. She didn't seem at all disappointed.

Although her invitation had been rejected, Sheryl said, "Come and visit anytime."

Alice responded arrogantly: "H-hmph! If I feel like it, I *may* grace you with my presence!" Then she headed off toward the rose garden and Oz and Gilbert.

As Sheryl watched her go, she murmured cheerfully, "Now, then—All that's left is the kitten."

5

"BREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAK!!"

Sharon raised her voice angrily as soon as she set foot in Break's private room, in a corner of the Rainsworth mansion.

Break was standing by the window, looking out and crunching a hard candy. As Sharon entered, cloaked in an aura of wrath, he turned to face her, waving beamishly.

"If it isn't my lady. Good afterno—"

In a motion too fast to follow, Sharon's *harisen* flashed. Break went flying.

The strike had been so blindingly fast that Break was still smiling when he crashed into the wall. Sharon had run all the way from her room; she was panting for breath, shoulders heaving.

Break looked up, with his neck still bent at an impossible angle.

"Ha-ha-ha… That's just like you, my lady. I didn't even manage to *fall* safely."

“That is of absolutely no importance whatsoever! You—! You put outrageous ideas into Alice-san’s head!”

“Did you *enjoy* it?”

“A-as if I would!” Sharon retorted automatically.

Break, realigning his neck with a series of pops and snaps, murmured, “Oh, really?” He sounded mystified.

“You seemed rather enthusiastic about it, for all that. When Alice-kun counterattacked, your response was a bit weak.”

“B-B-B-B-Breeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaak?!”

Sharon’s embarrassment was profound, and her face flushed so red it seemed about to burst into flames.

“Y-y-y-you… Were you…watching that…?!”

“No, I just said it off the top of my head. However, from that reaction, I can’t have been far from the—”

Sharon readied her *harisen* again.

She seemed to be thinking, *The only way to shut him up is to kill him!* However, even faced with Sharon’s overwhelming aura, Break laughed impassively. Then, quite casually, he said:

“Really, I’ve never seen anyone *less* uncoordinated than you. You have *nothing* to worry about.”

“

Sharon glared at Break. Her eyes were slightly misty with shame and wretchedness.

If I can't do at least that much, then I can't walk beside Break—

No, she thought. *Beside Xerx Nii-san. That was what I thought, so I—*

Xerxes Break.

He was her subordinate at Pandora, a servant of the House of Rainsworth, and someone she'd spent so much time with ever since she was small that he felt like a big brother to her. He was self-centered, secretive, and he'd start acting arbitrarily if left to himself for a second.

If she were going to be with him, it wouldn't do for her to tag along behind him, constantly being protected.

That was what she'd thought. And so…

She hadn't wanted him to know she was practicing alone.

She certainly hadn't wanted him to know it wasn't going well.

She felt embarrassed and pathetic.

"Did you think no one knew?"

Break's voice was warm, without a hint of ridicule.

That only made Sharon more uncomfortable. Fighting back the urge to run away, she gave a small nod.

"We know. Everyone's worried about you. They're afraid you may *hurt* yourself."

"Everyone?!"

Sharon couldn't believe it. How many people did "everyone" cover? *Really* everyone? Every last person at the main house? Even though she'd gone late at night, and chosen her place carefully, so that no one would find out?

"Yes, every last person in this house. For the past several days, it's all they've been talking about."

"…I had no idea."

At Sharon's stunned confession, Break laughed heartily: "Ah-ha-ha-ha-haaaah!"

Sharon's shock was so great that she came very near to collapsing to her knees on the floor.

Then she came back to herself with a jolt.

"Then you mean Grandmother also—"

The response to those words came, not from Break, but from the woman herself, in the doorway.

"Of course. As a matter of fact, I was the first to notice."

"Grandmother!" Sharon whirled around.

There was Sheryl, in her wheelchair, pushed by a servant. She smiled brightly and waved a hand at Sharon.

On seeing her, Sharon's mind replayed the conversation they'd had when her grandmother had summoned her.

Come here, Sharon-chan.

Yes, Grandmother. Did you need me for something?

Oh, it's nothing important. I had something I wanted to ask you, that's all.

Something to ask me?

That's right. Did you know that a cat has been sighted on the manor grounds recently?

A…cat? No, I didn't.

The kitten seems to be practicing hunting.

Practicing hunting…

It's been worrying me a bit, you see. Don't you know anything about it?

No, I…

"Oh, I did forget to mention…?" Sheryl turned an affectionate smile on Sharon, who was in a daze. "The kitten always appears late at night."

Sharon wished the floor would open and swallow her up. As she watched her granddaughter—whose face was as red as it could possibly get—Sheryl's expression grew tranquil. Then she turned slightly reproving eyes on Break.

"Xerx-kun. As pleased as I am that you wanted to divert Sharon-chan…"

What is she talking about? Sharon thought.

"…I can't approve of the way you used others to do it."

"……I'm sure I don't know what you mean. Ha-ha-ha!" Break gave a patently evasive smile.

…In other words, he'd put strange ideas into Alice's head and teased Sharon, all to force Sharon's mood up and out of her depression—

Was that what it was about? Sharon thought.

…Either way, she couldn't bring herself to meekly thank him.

Even if he'd done it out of concern for her…

There's no doubt he was entertaining himself as well. This is Xerx Nii-san, after all.

Sharon sighed.

"—ach you?"

Break had said something, but Sharon, deep in her own thoughts, hadn't heard.

"What?" She turned to look at him, answering his question with a question. "Did you say something, Break?"

"I *said*"—Break closed an eye—"if you'd like, shall I teach you?"

Swordsmanship.

She'd assumed he'd be against it. Not only Break: She'd thought every member of the Rainsworth household would say, *There's no need for you to swing a sword around.*

She thought they'd only worry she'd get hurt.

I mean, Sharon thought, a bit resentfully, *earlier, when I first tried to cook, all I did was cut my fingertip a little, and Break hasn't let me hold a kitchen knife since—*

…However.

"My, what a splendid idea."

When even Sheryl voiced her approval of Break, Sharon's mood shifted into a confused mixture of all sorts of feelings. She felt at a loss, and depressed, and…happy.

What wasted effort, she thought.

Break was a master swordsman. If she'd let him instruct her, she would have improved to some extent, she wouldn't have worried about her abilities, and she might not have worried anyone else.

The next time she saw Alice, she thought, she really would have to apologize to her for having gotten her involved in this mess.

"Yes, Break. I should have done it that way from the start."

It was true. She would have done better to ask Break to teach her at the outset.

Self-centered, secretive, and ready to act arbitrarily if left to himself for a second—that had been her assessment of Break. Still, thinking about this incident, she realized with embarrassment that the assessment described her as well.

Sharon steadied her breathing. Resolving to ask meekly, she looked at Break.

Break smiled cheerfully.

"That said, if you injure yourself in the slightest, I'll make you stop immediately."

Sharon was aghast.

"That's raising the bar rather high, don't you think?!"

Inwardly, she fumed. She *was* being treated like a child.

Self-centered, secretive, and ready to act arbitrarily if left to himself for a second—her assessment of Break.

But that wasn't all.

Xerx Nii-san is…

Sharon thought, resolutely, that she'd have to add one more item to that list.

Xerx Nii-san is overprotective!

That was precisely *why* she'd wanted to learn to use a sword so that she could stand beside him, without being constantly protected.

Wasn't this putting the cart before the horse?

Just watch, Sharon thought. Someday, for sure, she'd make him acknowledge that she could do more than just let herself be protected. Someday, she'd leave Break speechless.

The young lady was all fired up.

Meanwhile…
“Sharon-chan still needs a bit of looking after, doesn’t she.”
“Yes, we’ll have to keep an eye on her.”
Genially, cheerfully, Sheryl and Break exchanged eloquent glances.

~ Fin ~

The Story
of
THE BARMAS

PINK CURSE

Turbulent Days

1

Eight months and twenty-two days.

That was the amount of time Reim Lunettes had worked without a holiday. Reim—who handled paperwork at Pandora and also served Rufus Barma, the head of the House of Barma and one of the four great dukes—performed a staggering amount of work every day.

Reim had an established reputation for doing quick, dependable work. In particular, the reports he drafted were renowned for their accuracy and the beautiful perfection of their text.

That said, as far as Reim was concerned, it was only natural for reports to be accurate and watertight. He didn't think it was anything special enough to warrant praise.

In those eight months and twenty-two days, Reim had not gone a single day without drafting a report.

He'd drafted, and drafted, and kept right on drafting.

…And now. Today.

Finally, after eight months and twenty-two days, Reim had gotten a day off. It was his first in a very long time. A whole day of freedom.

If he were to come right out and say it, it also meant:

Today, I don't have to write a single report!

Yes. It had meant that. …But.

"……"

Reim stepped into the entry hall of the main Barma residence. He was wearing his Pandora uniform.

The servant who came to meet him looked mystified. Many people knew that today was Reim's day off, and yet here he was, in uniform. "Is something the matter?" the servant asked. His expression was puzzled.

"I've been summoned by Rufus-sama."

Through the lenses of his glasses, Reim turned a gaze that didn't betray a shred of dissatisfaction on the servant.

"The master…?"

"Apparently he has a job that he wants me to handle personally."

At Reim's words, the servant's expression shifted into one of pity. He was probably sympathizing with him—*Just when you'd finally gotten a day off…*—but as far as Reim was concerned, it wasn't necessary. If there was a job that needed to be done, he'd long been prepared to forgo as many vacation days as it took.

The fact that he'd been summoned personally meant it was a job only

he could do.

If they had need of his strength, he would meet that need.

To Reim, this was only natural, and he felt it was well worth doing.

“Is Rufus-sama in his study?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“All right. Thanks,” Reim said politely.

He started toward the great staircase that stretched from the entry hall to the upper floors.

As he climbed the stairs, the itinerary for his day off, which he’d been planning in detail for the past week, flickered through his mind, but he banished it almost immediately. Reading, going shopping… Now that he thought about it, the plan hadn’t been anything special.

If anything, he thought, it was more like him to spend his vacation day working than lazing around.

At that image of himself, Reim gave a small, wry smile.

If I told Xerx about this, he’d probably make fun of me.

His friend’s face rose in his mind. Xerx was also a member of Pandora, but it was always hard to tell whether he was doing his job or just messing around.

Finally, Reim reached the top of the stairs, walked down a long hall, and arrived at the door to Rufus’s study.

He knocked.

“Rufus-sama, it’s Reim Lunettes.”

From beyond the door, a voice told him to come in. As he set a hand on the brass knob, in a corner of his mind, Reim murmured, …*Well. At least—*

He opened the door, quietly.

—if I can get through the whole day without drafting a report, that will be enough for me. As long as this isn’t Pandora business, it shouldn’t be necessary.

He entered the study, bowed, and faced his master.

…And then, Rufus hit Reim with a startling declaration:

“Should naught change, I must die. Victim of a malicious curse…”

Huh? Inwardly, Reim was perplexed.

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Barma but for aristocratic society as a whole. The matter calls for a rapid response and development of countermeasures, and I am convinced that the advanced administrative abilities I display under ordinary conditions are the reason Rufus-sama has chosen to place me in charge.

The fact that today was my first day off in approximately nine months is trivial. Compared to having been entrusted with Rufus-sama's confidence, the fact that my plans for the day—which I had spent a week meticulously designing, ever since my first day off in a long while was confirmed—have come to nothing is of no significance.

Having been placed in charge of the matter, my first act was to immediately hear the story from Rufus-sama. Below, I present that information in an interview format.

Q. What sort of curse is it?
A. The name appears to be "the curse of Mahani," but I know not the details. However, those who are cursed most assuredly die within a few days. I must not die yet. Do what thou must to discern a way to break the curse.

Q. How did you discover that you'd been cursed?
A. (Taking out a vase with a broken neck) This was made in a far-distant land and bestowed on me as a gift. At the time, I was told that this vase was created for use as a ritual implement in a sinister ceremony known as "Mahani," and that it curses to death anyone who treats it carelessly, breaks, or damages it. Should naught change, I must die. Do something, posthaste.

Q. Why did you accept something so dangerous? What sort of person gave a thing like that as a gift? Wasn't the respondent at all suspicious of someone like that? If you weren't, then you were far too carele— I beg your pardon, sir.
A. What manner of fool would refuse a gift! It came from a clearly suspicious itinerant peddler. In truth, that was what attracted me and made me bid him enter.

Q. …Be a bit more careful, please. All right: Where is the peddler?
A. I am searching, but have so far failed to discern his whereabouts. … Should my life end here, who will push Sheryl's wheelchair…?! Nay, I will not stand for it… I refuse to let another man touch those handles…

**Note 1: The wheelchair: I wish you'd think about the magnitude of the effect your fate will have on the organization.*

Q. I am a servant. If ordered to investigate, I have no reason to refuse.

A. Naturally.

Q. However, you are the current head of the House of Barma, the most prominent of the four great dukedoms with regard to information and intelligence—
A. You needn't praise me on that account. I know it full well.

Q. (clears throat) If this is something that you, the head of the House of Barma, does not know, it isn't very likely that I'll turn up results by groping around blindly. Isn't there anything that could provide a clue regarding a way to break the curse? If there is, please tell me.
A. There is.

Q. Such as?
A. One is the very name "Mahani."

Q. …Anything else?
A. Pink.

Q. By "pink," do you mean the color?
A. —A very good question.

At this point, the respondent began urging the interviewer to begin his investigation, and the interview ended.

** Note 2: The respondent requested that this matter be investigated in secret. He is probably concerned about the possibility of spreading confusion among the members of the House of Barma and the organization. The interviewer agreed to this request and informed the respondent that he would conduct the investigation on his own.*

**Note 3: While unnecessary, the author's personal opinion regarding this matter follows.*

Ordinarily, even if he were cursed, Rufus-sama is the type who would use his encyclopedic knowledge of the occult to dispel the curse, and would enjoy doing so. Although it does not apply in this case, if the source of the curse happened to be a person, he would no doubt gleefully curse them back with enough force to make them regret ever having cursed him.

This curse has even Rufus-sama terrified. I will have to go about this very carefully.

+ + + +

In the library, the pride of the House of Barma, home to a collection of books that rivaled the national library:

"I…have absolutely no idea!"

Reim's voice was tinged with fatigue. As he spoke, he tossed the dictionary of the occult he'd been looking through onto the reading table with a heavy *whump*. A mountain of thick tomes was already piled at the seat where Reim had set up camp.

He'd read so many difficult books in one sitting that he'd given himself a dull headache.

"Haaaaaah…" Reim heaved a long sigh. "'The curse of Mahani,' huh?"

Muttering wearily, Reim glanced at the towers of documents that surrounded him. He considered taking a break, then thought better of it and picked up a volume he hadn't opened yet.

Rufus-sama seemed…

"I must not die yet. Do what thou must to discern a way to break the curse.

"Should naught change, I must die. Do something, posthaste."

Although he'd spoken the way he always did, his tone had held faint but definite traces of impatience, unease, and fear.

…It wasn't like him. Those emotions were very unlike the Rufus Reim knew.

However, the weight of being made to confront one's own death might be that great. It was something Reim hadn't personally experienced yet. He couldn't imagine what being forced to face his own death would do to him. Would he be afraid, and panic, and fall to pieces? He hoped he wouldn't, but…

But even Rufus-sama…

Up until now, he'd assumed his master's only weakness was Sheryl, the head of the House of Rainsworth. He hadn't thought anyone or anything else could frighten Rufus—as far as Reim's mental image of him was concerned, not even his own death.

Rufus-sama is human, too, Reim thought. *It isn't odd for him to have a fragile side.*

The pressure of the need to save him weighed heavily on his back. Reim trusted his master. He trusted his knowledge and deep insight, and his resourcefulness. Rufus-sama had said the name of the curse itself —"the curse of Mahani"—was a clue.

"Mahani."

M A H A N I

Reim mentally visualized the spelling. It was an odd word; he'd never seen or heard it before.

This investigation was like trying to grasp a cloud.

Just then:

"Reim. How dost thou fare?"

Reim had removed his glasses and was massaging the bridge of his nose with his fingers in an attempt to ease his aching eyes, when Rufus abruptly made an appearance.

He was holding his opened fan so that it hid the lower half of his face, and was watching Reim with keen interest.

Reim was caught off guard. Taken aback, he started with enough force that his chair clattered. Hastily, he put his glasses back on.

"Rufus-sama…"

"Hast thou discovered aught? Hmm?"

"No. I'm sorry."

Reim felt embarrassed. Rufus's expression seemed somehow mischievous, and Reim frowned, perplexed.

"Have you recovered already?"

Even now, while he was being cursed to death…

At that, Rufus's expression turned contemptuous.

"Canst thou not tell I am feigning courage, half-wit? This is why thou hast never yet bested thine elder brother."

"I-I'm very sorry, sir," Reim apologized, ashamed.

Rufus cast a glance at the scores of books surrounding Reim and gave a small sigh.

He closed his fan, using its tip to tap the cover of one of the volumes, and spoke. "If thou canst glean naught from these, why not take thyself to Pandora?"

"To Pandora?"

"Mm. While not the equal of Barma's, Pandora's library is quite good. There are many nobles there besides. If thou shouldst interview them, thou might chance upon information from some unexpected quarter. Aye, those of the four great dukedoms may possess rare information."

I see, Reim thought.

He'd thought, if he were unable to uncover anything by investigating at Barma, there'd be nothing left for him to try. However, while there was no telling how much he could expect from Pandora's library, the dignitaries of the four families might know something. Reim thanked Rufus and rose from his chair.

"I'll head over right away. —Oh. Before I do, though."

"What?"

"I'll stop by the office first."

"Wherefore?" Rufus's expression seemed to say, *Would you hurry up and go?*

"I'd like to organize the information I've found so far."

…In a report.

Even if he had nowhere to submit it, the act of drafting it would help him get his thoughts in order. Reim took his leave of Rufus, went to the office, and drafted his report in a very short time. It came out rather rough, but since it wasn't a formal report, he ignored that.

When he'd finished the report, he left the Barma mansion for Pandora Headquarters.

It was already evening.

Reim could tell he was going to use up his entire day on this matter.

Still, as he walked toward Pandora, Reim seemed dignified and untroubled.

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+ + + +

• Gilbert Nightray
• Vincent Nightray
• (Echo)

Other
• Alice

**Note 1: There was no real reason for the selection of these particular individuals. I simply encountered them by chance at Pandora. Additionally, while the conversations I had with them were not uniformly useful, I have recorded them here in light of their value as future evidence and documentation.*

Below, I present the content of these conversations in an interview format. Interviews are recorded in the order in which I encountered the respondents.

+ + + +

Q. …I can't imagine she'd be behind picture frames or in vases…
A. I thought there might still be one around somewhere. You know, *those*, from last week. They were little and cute. I can't get them out of my head.

Q. Last week… That was quite an ordeal, wasn't it.
A. I'm really sorry for causing all that trouble for everyone at Pandora.

Q. There's no need for you to apologize, Oz-sama. Don't worry about it.
A. Thanks.

Q. By the way, there was something I wanted to ask you.
A. What?

Q. Are you familiar with something called "the curse of Mahani"?
A. Yes, I know about it.

** Note 2: At this point, the interviewer—who hadn't expected the respondent to know anything about "the curse of Mahani"—was shaken and fell silent for a short while. The respondent went ahead and spoke without any urging from the interviewer, for which the interviewer is grateful.*

A. I don't remember all that well, but I've heard that, in order to break the curse, you need several people.

Q. …I see. In that case, do you have any idea what "pink" might have to do with the curse?
A. No clue. You mean "pink" as in the color girls like, right?
+ + + +

pulled in as well.

…*I'll leave that aside for now*, Reim decided, and hailed Alice.

He'd been startled that Oz knew about "the curse of Mahani," and he didn't think Alice would know anything. Even as he thought this, he called, "Alice-kun, do you have a minute?"

Alice turned to look at Reim.

+ + + +

+ +

After parting with Alice, Reim headed toward the Pandora library.

I've just learned something bloodcurdling…

Reim's face was rather gray.

Who would have thought that Sharon-sama… No, I'd better forget about this. I didn't hear a thing! Never mind that, there's a curse to investigate!

As Reim walked down the corridor, shaking his head hard, passing Pandora employees glanced at him as though they were seeing something very odd. Reim didn't notice. Finally, when Reim had managed to calm himself down, he saw a lone woman standing at a corner in the corridor, up ahead.

It was rare to see this particular individual at Pandora Headquarters. It was Ada Vessalius, Oz's little sister.

Oscar, Oz and Ada's uncle, was one of the four great dukes, and as the current head of the House of Vessalius, he held an important post at Pandora. It was plausible to assume Ada was here because Oscar had summoned her for something.

Ada seemed to be hiding at the corner of the corridor, stealthily peeking into the other hallway.

??? Reim thought, puzzled, and walked up to Ada from behind.

Doing his best not to startle her, he called her name softly, laying a hand on her shoulder. "…Ada-sama?"

"—?!"

Ada flinched violently, giving a soundless scream. She whirled around as if she'd been struck.

I don't think I could have startled her worse if I'd tried…

"I beg your pardon," Reim said, bowing. "But…could I ask what you're doing here?"

"Oh, n-n-n-n-n-no… It—it isn't like that, I was—" Ada insisted. Her face was bright red, and her eyes were full of tears.

Hearing right off the bat that "it wasn't like that" told Reim absolutely nothing.

On closer inspection, Ada was holding a book with a black cover to her chest, as if it was something very, very precious.

+ + + +

Q. Is there something around the corner?
A. No, nothing. That wasn't it, I wasn't…peeking, or anything like that!

Q. I see… By the way, what is that book you're holding so carefully?
A. This is… It's… I was planning to recommend it to…to Vincent-sama…

Q. Recommend it…to Vincent-sama?
A. Listen, I'm sorry, it isn't like thaaaaaaaat…!!

**Note 5: At this point, the respondent left the scene at high velocity. I was unable to follow her, and failed to ask her about "the curse of Mahani."*

**Note 6: The respondent seemed to have dropped her book. It was discovered at the scene after she departed.*
+ + + +

However, he was notorious for almost never leaving the Nightray mansion.

Reim remembered that Ada had said she meant to recommend the magic book to Vincent-sama.

He considered passing it on to Vincent himself, right there, but almost immediately thought better of it.

No doubt Ada-sama wanted to give it to him personally.

Reim decided not to do anything too forward. He drew a small breath.

"—Vincent-sama," he addressed him, bowing. Noticing Reim, Vincent smiled.

It was a decorous smile. However, it held no sense of affection for the other person. Echo was standing next to Vincent, and as he spoke, he stroked her head.

"We just came by for a bit of fun. Was that all right…?"

"Of course. I'm afraid I can't personally accommodate you just now, though."

Vincent only murmured, "I see." He smiled tranquilly; he didn't seem to mind.

Simply having Vincent smile at him made Reim feel as if it was a bit hard to breathe.

I'm really no good with this person…

+ + + +

A. …
A. —Echo.
A. …Yes. Puh…Papa.

**Note 7: They're blood relations?! I had no idea!*

A. …Please kill me.
+ + + +

“Hullo, Reim-san.”

His friend—a “friend” he couldn’t shake, no matter how hard he tried—waved at him cheerily. For some reason, the moment he saw him, Reim thought:

exception and tell you, so just rub my shoulders, *would* you?

Q. …Why your shoulders?
A. Oh, my lower back would be fine, too.

Q. That's not what I meant.
A. It's the price of the *information*. What your master's always bringing up. Go on. You're in a hurry, aren't you?

Q. Blast you… Look, you can talk while I'm rubbing your shoulders, so talk.
A. Ahhh, that's the spot. No, I don't know it.

**Note 8: At this point, the interviewer momentarily considered strangling the respondent.*

A. My lady does, however. I do know *that*.
+ + + +

- Respondent: Gilbert Nightray
  Time: 1920
  Place: Pandora Headquarters, staircase landing
  Notes: Respondent seemed to be worried about a profound topic.

Q. Has something happened recently? …To do with women, I mean.
A. Venemous spid— N-no, nothing. There's no way a woman and I would… It's not even possible.

**Note 9: The respondent was incredibly unsettled. Something must have happened.*

A. If only… Why can't all women be like Ada-sama…?

Q. …

**Note 10: Interviewer began to feel a bit concerned for the respondent. Was he all right?*

A. I don't understand.

Q. Erm, could I ask you a question? I'm afraid it's about something else…
A. I don't understand, Reim.

Q. The word "Mahani." Have you…?
A. …Never heard of it.

Q. All right. If you'll excuse me, then.
A. (sigh)
+ + + +

"Shall I order tea?" she asked, reaching for the bell on the desk.

"Please don't bother," Reim said, refusing politely, but with an impish smile, Sharon said *she* wanted some, and rang the bell. Almost immediately, a servant appeared with a tea set.

As Sharon offered tea to Reim, elegantly sipping from her own teacup, she motioned for him to begin.

"…And? What is it?"

+ + + +

**Note 11: Just then, the aura the respondent exuded made the interviewer's blood run cold.*

I regretted my heart's carelessness.

I thought I might die without completing my investigation. Even as I write this, my hand is shaking.

A. I'm afraid I didn't catch that. What did you say? Heh-heh-heh.

Q. No, it was nothing. Excuse me.

That completes the interviews. I find myself right back where I started…

+ + + +

“Yes, I can read.”

In the moonlight, he was able to make out the rows of fine letters in the report without straining.

“To a moonlit night like this—” He spoke the words without thinking.

They were Rufus’s words, the ones that had drifted into Reim’s mind on the staircase landing a short while ago.

Words from a conversation he’d once had with Rufus.

Yes… It had been night, a night like this one, lit by a bright full moon. Rufus had said:

“Even though a

anything else was needed. Such was the presence of the tree and its cloud of blossoms.

At the base of the tree, several people had gathered.

Rufus, Oz, Ada, Gilbert, Sharon, Break—and Reim.

Everyone except for Reim was seated on a thin carpet that had been unrolled on the grass. In the center of the circle were plates of hors d'oeuvres and several bottles of liquor made from Rufus's prized rice, along with many small plates, forks, and other utensils.

It looked exactly like a nocturnal picnic.

A short while earlier…

"In a distant foreign land, I am told, there is a custom known as 'hanami.'"

Rufus had told Reim a story he'd heard from a merchant who'd sold him an unusual liquor made from rice.

"'Tis a banquet whereat guests admire flowers, savor spirits, sing songs, and display their talents."

"Like a kind of garden party?"

Reim fished a word he was familiar with out of his memory. Rufus told him it was similar, but that there were several differences.

One of the differences Rufus had been most taken with was that *hanami* were sometimes held by moonlight. Guests enjoyed the banquet and admired the flowers with the moon as their only light, using no lamps or candlesticks.

That certainly was unlike the garden parties Reim knew.

The moon had been bright and full on the night when they'd had that conversation.

However, it had already been too late to invite guests, and in the end, no *hanami* was held that night.

"Even though a hanami *would be most suited to a moonlit night like this…"*

"You're right."

Rufus had sounded vexed, and Reim had agreed with him.

Honestly…

Reim sat alone, leaning against the trunk of the great tree, a little apart from the circle of guests enjoying the banquet.

If he wanted to hold a hanami, *he could have just said so…*

How roundabout. What a nuisance. Those were Reim's honest feelings.

"MAHANI," shuffled a bit, became "HANAMI."

When he'd caught on and solved the childish little anagram, Reim visited Rufus's study and gave the answer. At that, Rufus looked out the study window, confirmed that the moon had risen in the night sky, and

spoke, sounding satisfied:

"Hm. Laudable timing. If thou hadst not seen through this paltry word game, I would have released thee from service for eternity, not merely today. Go on, make ready, quickly."

…Just as if he'd known Reim would visit at that hour all along.

Rufus said that everything they'd need was already in place.

He also said:

"The invitations were issued yestereve. I said the purpose was to gladden my servant Reim's first holiday in a long time, and mayhap it proved effective, for many expressed their intention to attend…although the most important guest declined, and it has badly damaged my humor…"

"……*Invitations?"* Reim muttered, dazed. He hadn't even heard the last half of what Rufus had said. In response, Rufus gave several names: Oz, Sharon, and Break. On the invitations, he had also written that parties were better when lively, and requested that they bring their friends and acquaintances.

On top of that, the summons wasn't the only thing that had been written on the invitations.

"Haaah…"

Heaving a sigh that was tinged with fatigue, Reim looked up at the great tree he was leaning against.

In the darkness, the tiny, delicate, pale-pink flowers were vivid as they swayed in the night breeze, picked out by moonlight.

When he sniffed, audibly, he caught their faint, elegant fragrance.

"—A cherry tree. The Somei-Yoshino variety, or so I hear."

Someone spoke, unexpectedly, right next to him. When Reim turned to look, there was Break, kneeling with a bottle of liquor in one hand, two small cups in the other, and a smile on his face.

"Here," he said. He handed one of the cups to Reim and filled it from the bottle.

Reim had been told that the liquor was made from rice, and a unique, sweet scent did indeed tickle his nostrils. However, the cup was very small, and it could only hold a mouthful of the stuff.

Reim drained his cup in one go. "Not very cultured, are you?" Break smiled wryly, sipping at his own cup. "This is drunk like so—small sips, almost as if you were licking it."

"I don't care. It's not enough." He held his cup out, imperiously.

"You did wonderful work all day today, Reim-san."

Speaking sympathetically, Break poured liquor into Reim's cup. Reim brought the cup to his lips and took a very small sip, imitating Break.

As he did so, he glared at Break, steadily. Lowering the cup, he said, "What's this 'surprise party' business? Even *you* were in on it…"

"Yes, Duke Barma really *is* a problem, isn't he. That was more a full-dress order than an invitation."

The previous evening, Oz, Sharon, and Break had received invitations from Rufus.

Apparently, the invitations had begun with the words REIM IS EVER DILIGENT, HENCE, KINDHEARTED AS I AM, I HAVE DECIDED TO HOST A BANQUET FOR HIM—, and had been crammed to bursting with declarations of just what a considerate master he was to his servants.

On top of that, in addition to the veritable concert of self-congratulation, he'd said that, to heighten Reim's joy when it was time for the banquet, he had prepared a modest additional entertainment.

This was to have Reim run around Pandora Headquarters gathering information from the guests on the pretext of having him investigate a curse: "the curse of Mahani," an anagram of "hanami." …It had been shrewd of Rufus not to tell Gilbert and Alice: Both were bad at acting and intrigue. Apparently, the invitations had ended with these words:

—ON LEARNING THAT WHAT HE BELIEVES IS A CURSE IS IN TRUTH A BANQUET IN HIS HONOR, REIM WILL ASSUREDLY BE STARTLED AND MOVED TO TEARS. THOU SHOULDST ALSO BE GRATEFUL TO ME FROM THE BOTTOM OF THY COLLECTIVE HEART FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTAKE IN THIS SUPERB EVENT…

After hearing a general explanation from Break, Reim sighed deeply.

"I wasn't moved to tears. I was so appalled I almost cried…"

"Now, now." Break's expression was consoling. "It looks as though Duke Barma's greatest ambition was thwarted, in any case."

"Ambition?" Reim looked back at Break, puzzled.

"Yes, I heard about it from my lady—"

Then Break told him about it, lowering his voice a bit. To be accurate, he said, it was something Sheryl had said when Sharon had gone to ask her grandmother for permission to go out at night. After hearing that an invitation had arrived, and that the party was for a servant, Sheryl had thought for a little while. Then she'd spoken to Sharon. With a cheerful, sunny little laugh, she'd said:

"Tell him that it's very shallow of him to use Reim-san to show off his kindness."

"…And Sharon-sama told him that?"

"Of *course* she did. And, on hearing it, Duke Barma apparently considered canceling the party—although, in the end, as you can see, he didn't. He must've known what Sheryl-sama would say later if he called it off."

At hearing Break's story, as you'd expect, Reim sighed deeply. He had no words.

…Rufus-sama really is a problem…

Reim muttered to himself, silently, and lifted the cup to his lips. Two sips, three, and the cup was empty again. Reim turned his gaze to the ring of people a short distance away. Rufus, who'd apparently already had quite a bit to drink, seemed to be in high spirits, fluttering his fan and reciting a poem in the center of the circle.

Like Reim, Break looked at Rufus and spoke, sounding impressed.

"He's completely recovered. I'd say Duke Barma is the one most enjoying the *hanami* at this point."

"…Mm…" Reim said, briefly.

Break looked at him.

"I think he's wanted to hold one of these for quite a while now…"

At Reim's words, it all seemed to make sense to Break.

"So he was trying for two birds with one stone…or *three* birds, rather. That's Duke Barma the strategist for you," he added, admiringly.

Three birds…? Reim thought about what that meant. One was looking good in front of Sheryl. The second was his own desire. The third—*Was it really…to reward me?*

It might have been, and it might not. He didn't know.

…And so Reim said "Pour," thrusting his cup out at Break.

"Yes, yes," Break said, and poured, smiling wryly. In return, Reim poured some for Break as well. "—Whoops!" Break said, deftly lifting the brimming cup to his lips.

Reim's gaze shifted from Rufus to the people seated around him. Abruptly, he asked, "What about it? Does Sharon-sama enjoy drinking, too?"

"…Yes, well…"

Unusually for him, Break faltered. Reim gave a small sigh.

"I see. She doesn't look as if she does."

"'Enjoy' might not be the… Well, it should be fine. She said she wouldn't drink today."

Reim had wondered what would happen if she did drink, but he felt it wouldn't be wise to ask, so he left it at that.

A close look at the circle revealed a variety of circumstances. Gilbert's face was bright red; he'd already drunk himself insensible, and was being tended to by Oz and Ada. Sharon was watching the three of them fondly and darting discrete glances at the bottles of liquor, as if thinking, *A little bit might be all right*. Rufus was saying something, looking displeased by the fact that no one was paying attention to him.

Possibly this rice wine was more potent than its sweetness suggested, or possibly he was just tired. Reim could really hold his liquor, and even his cheeks were faintly flushed.

"I never thought my day off would turn out like this…" he muttered with a cynical smile.

Then…

Fwiiissh. The night wind picked up, blowing through the garden, shaking the branches of the great cherry tree and scattering blossoms. Pale-pink petals danced in the moonlight. The contrast with the darkness was beautiful, like something from a waking dream. In the midst of it all, Rufus's long, vermillion hair fluttered, and his fan swam right and left, as though tracing the course of the petals.

It looked almost as if he was beckoning them to a world of

mysterious, subtle beauty—

Before long, the wind subsided.

Reim, who'd involuntarily held his breath, let it out.

"Reim-san."

Break called to him, a smile in his voice. Reim looked at him. He was pointing at Reim's cup.

On the surface of the brimming cup of liquor, a single petal floated.

The full moon in the night sky was reflected there as well.

"I don't think it gets more refined than *that*, do you?" Break said, cheerfully.

"…You're right," Reim agreed. He glanced at Rufus. Rufus was hiding his mouth behind his open fan and watching Reim with eyes slightly narrowed in a smile.

What dost thou think? he was asking Reim, proudly.

Good grief…

Muttering to himself on a sigh, Reim lifted the cup to his lips.

He drank down the liquor, the petal, and the full moon, all together. Break cheered him on: "*That's* the spirit!"

Reim thought.

The rough report he'd drafted today, the one he had nowhere to send. When the party was over and he returned home, he thought, he'd write a report summarizing the day, to finish up.

Privately, he already knew what he'd write in it.

He took his well-worn notebook from his breast pocket, briskly scribbling a note on a blank page with his pen.

Then:

I'll never be able to show this report to anyone, he thought.

The words he'd written in his notebook were:

“This sort of thing isn’t half bad, once in a while.”

~ Fin ~

A SIDE EPISODE OF PINK CURSE
WHAT'S THIS? REIM-SAN ...
... YOU'RE A BIT FLUSHED!
.....HUH?
NOW, THAT IS UNUSUAL. ARE YOU DRUNK?
.....I DON'T FEEL DRUNK...
WHAT'S UP?
HMM?
REIM-SAN, YOU'RE GOOD AT DRINKING? ...REALLY?
.....
IS HE GOOD?
TO PUT IT BLUNTLY— THE MAN'S A SPONGE.
...YES. YES, I AM...

...IT'S PART OF MY JOB.
SINCE HE WON'T GET DRUNK AND SPILL SECRETS, HE GETS SENT TO A LOT OF THOSE PLACES TO GATHER INFORMATION. ...DON'T YOU?
WELL, IT DOES MEAN HE ALWAYS GETS STUCK TAKING CARE OF DRUNKS AND CLEANING UP.
WHAAA—!? NO WAAAY! I'D NEVER HAVE GUESSED!!
YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE IT!
WHU... WHERE ARE YOOOOOU...?
MA... MAZTEEER
(TIPSY)
DON (BAM)
OZ-SAMA, THERE MUST BE A BETTER NAME FOR IT...
... YOU'RE THE BIGGEST SPONGE-MAN IN PANDORA!!
WHOAH!!
REIM-SAN, YOU'RE NOT JUST A NICE GUY WITH GLASSES...
*BOTH PREFER SWEET SNACKS.
BY THE WAY, WHEN HE'S WITH ME, NO MATTER HOW MUCH WE DRINK, WE'RE ALWAYS SOBER.
...THEN, WHAT'S THE POINT OF DRINKING?
BLISS

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